

# EVACUATION EARTH

The illustration depicts a dark, rocky mountain landscape under a deep blue night sky. In the foreground, a group of small, dark figures wearing backpacks are walking away from the viewer towards a large, dark cave entrance. Above the cave, a small, white, two-segmented rocket sits on a launch platform. In the upper right, a larger rocket is shown ascending, leaving a long, bright white trail. A crescent moon is visible in the top right corner of the sky.

Book FIVE of *The Comet Clement* series  
By: Kevin George

PART NINE **BOOK FIVE**

**“EVACUATION: EARTH”**

**BY: KEVIN GEORGE**

# PROLOGUE

Thomas Long was not a happy camper. It was bad enough he was given no respect by anyone at the entire NASSA compound, nor by his grandchildren who wondered why grandpa worked for the space administration but was not an astronaut and did not work on the space station. Kids were kids, though. No matter how many times he explained to them that he was head of maintenance for the entire facility, the grandkids did not understand there were many jobs that kept NASSA running smoothly. His profession was not glamorous, but he'd put in enough time at the job so he had nearly twenty people working under him. Plus, his salary was high enough that he didn't consider the thought of retirement, even though he was well past the age when most men hung up the working boots and relaxed during their remaining days.

But on days like today, Tom Long wished he was sitting on a boat somewhere in the middle of a lake, drinking a beer and holding a fishing pole.

"You want me to do *what*?" Long asked earlier in the day when first finding out what had to be done.

"You heard me," his boss responded. In all the years they'd worked together, Virginia Fortino never once made anything easy on Tom, nor did she ever treat him kindly. In fact, there were many times she assigned work simply to keep Long and his maintenance crew busy. But that was the job of the Senior NASSA Facility Coordinator, and Virginia never once allowed Tom's feelings to influence the jobs she needed completing. "We've rented a transportable storage container, and we want everything on the second floor of that building packed up."

"Why? In my last ten years of working here, I've only stepped inside that warehouse once or twice. I don't even know why it hasn't been ripped down," Tom said.

“Look, the job needs to be done and you’re the one who has to do it. And that’s final,” Virginia said. “Make sure everything is loaded into the storage container in an orderly fashion. It will be making a long trip and I don’t want everything messy when it gets to its destination.”

“Where is the container going?” Tom asked.

“That’s not information you’re privy to. I’ve already told you too much as it is,” Virginia said. “I have other things to get done so please leave my office.”

Tom shook his head in disgust, much the way he did when his own wife yelled at him to take out the garbage or mow the lawn. He hated doing unnecessary work when there were so many other tasks his workers needed to finish. With the high amount of traffic in and out of the facility, his workforce was too short-staffed to finish all of their normal duties, let alone ridiculous tasks such as the one given to him by Ms. Fortino. He could probably pull one or two of his men off normal details, but there was no doubt that Tom would also have to pitch in today and get his hands dirty.

He left the office and radioed two of his youngest workers, informing them to meet him at the warehouse assigned to him by his supervisor. He got into his familiar golf cart—the vehicle of choice for many people on the large NASSA compound—and drove toward the west end of the facility. At well over a thousand acres, the NASSA compound was home to many different buildings, including those for research, storage and construction. There was also a launch pad on site, although it hadn’t been used since the failed unmanned probe was lost in space a decade earlier. The west end was mostly deserted except for a few small warehouses, which were a fraction of the size of many newer buildings.

By the time the golf cart finally reached its destination, Tom Long noticed his two workers wandering around aimlessly near three decrepit warehouses, all similarly old. Although he worked on the facility for over thirty years, Tom would have had no idea which building to go to if not for the storage container parked in front of the warehouse farthest south. He waved the two men over and explained

that they were responsible for clearing out everything on the second floor and loading it all inside the container.

“I never even knew these buildings existed,” said Chuck Leben, the newest member of Tom’s staff. “I been here almost a year and never came to this part of the facility. If it wasn’t for Bill, I never would’ve found this place.”

Bill Griffin was the second newest member of the maintenance crew, having worked for Tom for around two years. Both of these guys were under twenty-five and had nothing in common with Tom, who never quite understood the whole spiked hair, tattooed arms and rumpled clothes look. While Tom might have considered these two ‘dumb and dumber,’ he didn’t care what they looked like as long as they had strong backs today.

“I never been to none of these buildings either,” Bill said. “Just remember passing them once when I got lost.”

“Yeah, I don’t know why they haven’t torn the warehouses down yet,” Tom agreed. He remembered that the warehouses were used for spare shuttle and probe parts in his early days working for the NASSA facility, but most of those relics were packed and sent away to museums years ago. “But we got a job to do so let’s go.”

It took Tom several minutes to find the right key to the warehouse from the large keyring he carried. When he moved toward the door, he loudly cursed after nearly tripping over a metal bucket that sat on the ground. Bill and Chuck both had a good laugh, which Tom ignored once he saw a piece of folder sticking out from under the overturned bucket. He bent over and pushed the bucket out of the way, where he found a manila envelope underneath that was badly burned, the only legible words printed at the top: HIGHLY CLASSIFIED. Tom opened the folder but all that fluttered out was ashes. He tossed the bucket and the folder aside and the three men entered the warehouse.

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The second floor wasn’t what Tom expected, but was actually a

nice surprise for once. He expected this to be an all-day, backbreaking job but was relieved to find only about an hour's worth of work he could've handled by himself. The top floor reminded him of an Army barracks, one large open floor with four rows of Army cots lined up next to one another. Each cot had one pillow on the end and though it didn't look like the room had been used for years, everything was still neatly arranged.

"This is it?" Chuck asked. "This is the *big* assignment you have for us, Tom?"

"That's right," Tom said. "But we have to be very careful keeping everything neat and orderly in the storage container. Supposedly these cots and pillows are being moved across the country."

"You mean NASSA is actually going to reuse these old relics?" Bill asked. "Billions of dollars on these new space shuttles and space stations and they're going to use cots that gotta be fifty years old?"

Tom shrugged, wondering the same thing himself. But it certainly wasn't his place to question the way NASSA worked their budget, as long as they saved enough money to pay his salary.

"It's either reuse old material or cut the maintenance budget," Tom said sarcastically. "Which would you prefer?"

"Hey, I ain't complaining," Bill said. "In fact, I'd much rather be moving these things than repainting parking lines over by the research buildings. This job should be a piece of cake."

"Okay, then let's get to it," Tom said. "And remember, keep all the cots and pillows together and make sure you're careful loading everything into the container."

The cots were easy enough to fold and transport and Tom was able to lend a helping hand without aggravating his normally tender back. Before long, the second floor was half-empty, as Chuck and Bill were still going strong. Tom eventually began to tire and decided not to overexert himself, instead concentrating on the careful arrangement of supplies in the storage container. With Tom outside, Chuck and Bill had a lot more freedom to talk about whatever they pleased.

"So, you're taking her out again tonight?" Chuck asked.

“That’s right, and tonight better be the big night,” Bill answered. “I didn’t take her out on three dates for nothing, know what I mean?”

Knowing how old-school and respectful that Tom was toward women (he had been married to his wife almost forty years), Bill and Chuck knew not to talk about such things in front of their boss. The old guy just didn’t understand that girls were different nowadays, and they wanted to be treated differently when it came to such things as—

“Hey, what’s that?” Chuck asked, as he followed Bill across the top floor toward the steps.

“What’s *what*?” Bill asked.

“That piece of paper just fell from your cot,” Chuck said, pointing to the slightly yellowed, folded paper now lying at Bill’s feet.

“Must’ve fallen from this cot,” Bill said, putting the cot down and picking up the paper. Although Chuck was curious what the paper was, Bill just shoved it back under the pillow, folded up the cot and continued telling his story as he reached the steps.

“Anyway, she keeps asking me technical stuff about the space station,” Bill said. “Don’t know how much longer I can keep her tricked.”

“You mean she still thinks that you been working on the space station project?” Chuck laughed, suddenly forgetting about the slip of paper altogether.

“I guess,” Bill said.

“You didn’t tell her you were a maintenance worker,” he asked, still laughing.

“She asked me where I worked, I said NASSA,” Bill said. “It ain’t my fault how she fills in the blanks.”

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The job was complete before lunchtime, every single cot cleared out and tied down. After the three men made one final inspection of the warehouse’s second floor, Tom Long radioed his boss to let her know they were done. NASSA Coordinator Virginia Fortino

was surprised to hear that Tom finished *any* job earlier than usual, but she was not about to congratulate him. Once he closed up the storage container and sent his two boys off to lunch, Tom did not have to wait long before a big NASSA truck arrived at the warehouse.

The driver assigned to this project hitched the container to the truck and made sure everything was secure for its journey, the destination about which Tom was quite curious. As was the case with most of the laborers who worked at the compound, Tom became friendly with this driver over the years.

“So, Bud, where’s this stuff getting sent?” Tom asked.

The driver quickly examined his paperwork, but stopped and looked at Tom with an expression of regret.

“Sorry, Tom, ain’t supposed to tell anybody where I’m taking this load,” Bud answered.

“A bunch of cots and pillows are top secret?” Tom asked.

Bud smiled and laughed.

“It is a bit ridiculous, I know,” Bud said. “When I read the inventory, I wondered why this stuff was even being shipped. But I guess NASSA is trying to recycle as much junk as possible with so much money used on their expensive new projects.”

“That’s exactly what I told my guys,” Tom agreed.

“Well, promise not to tell anyone, but this stuff is heading for some old Army base,” Bud said. “Don’t really know what’s out there, but I guess that ain’t my job to know.”

“I hear that,” Tom answered. “Well, have a nice trip.”

As Tom drove his golf cart back to the main center of the compound, he remained perplexed about the purpose of the last job. But by the end of the day, the thought had disappeared from his mind, along with the dozens of other useless stuff he did that day.



# CHAPTER ONE

MAY 25, 2020

TWO MONTHS, TWENTY-EIGHT DAYS UNTIL IMPACT...

As the days ticked away until President Andrew Brighton made his big announcement to the world, former President George Marshall felt an increasing amount of stress to his psyche, a weight on his back becoming heavier with every passing moment. The burden of secrecy was one Marshall was saddled with since first learning about Comet Clement twelve years earlier. Surprisingly, he had more difficulty with the secret over the past week than he *ever* did.

Though he was safely away from Earth—living aboard the space station set to save humankind—George Marshall felt his concern growing to an all-time high. He expected to hear from James Armour any day about Brighton’s announcement of the impending strike of Comet Clement. At that time, Marshall would have to inform the passengers aboard the space station. Marshall already heard ten different rumors spreading around the station about why everyone selected for the ‘Inaugural Month’ was young. The number of those people over the age of 35 was less than ten out of a thousand. The passengers on board were bright people, and once they heard George Marshall’s report about the comet, it would not take long to figure out that the whole ‘Inaugural Month’ celebration was just a sham to trick people to come aboard the space station. Marshall could only hope everyone would understand the means he used to get them there. If they didn’t, he knew that there could be a potential mutiny on his hands.

Marshall already began to take steps to avoid such a catastrophe, though. A few days earlier, the former president made his first ally—his most important ally—in the form of Sergeant Michael

Blatchford, the highest-ranking officer of the 100 military crew brought on board. Though only twenty-five years of age, Blatchford was well respected among his fellow Marines on board, making him the ideal person Marshall could align with. Blatchford had been surprised to see the former president seek him out for a private audience and even more shocked when Marshall told him every detail about Comet Clement.

As was the normal reaction from most people when told about the comet, Sergeant Blatchford was skeptical upon hearing the devastating news. After reassurances by Marshall about the truth, the first thing Blatchford realized was the actual purpose of the space station as an ark of safety. Figuring that a military man would appreciate the ‘straight truth,’ Marshall did not deny this fact. In keeping with full honesty, the former president even told the Marine that his reason for telling Blatchford was his concerns about keeping peace on board the space station once Marshall told the other passengers.

“I need to know I have you on my side,” Marshall told the sergeant. “I need to know you will support me in keeping peace aboard the station should trouble break out from unruly passengers. Needless to say, I don’t think I’ll be very popular once the truth is revealed.”

“Won’t most people be glad you decided to save their lives?” Sergeant Blatchford asked.

“That’s what I would hope, son, but there’s no telling how people will react,” Marshall answered. “We tried to select unmarried individuals with no strong family ties, but there’s no way to predict how people will react when they find out they’ll never again see their family or friends.”

Blatchford assured Marshall that he could control his fellow Marines, who would support the former president one-hundred percent despite their personal feelings about the upcoming bad news. Satisfied that he would be protected, Marshall swore the sergeant to secrecy and left his room, relieved that he took the appropriate step to ensure the station from falling into a state of chaos and disorder. For

the next few days, the former president felt certain he'd done everything needed for the big announcement. But it didn't take long for his sense of paranoia to kick in again.

In the years since learning about Comet Clement, George Marshall always had his 'Inner Circle,' the small, tightknit group of intelligent people who helped him make decisions. Men like James Armour, Peter Mansfield, Andrew Brighton and Earl Ackerman—before he went crazy and disappeared—helped wrap Marshall in a blanket of security and give him the confidence that every move he made was the best one. Now that his blanket was gone—Armour and Brighton would both live in the Russian underground bunker while Mansfield would not come to the space station until the last flight from Earth—Marshall felt the coldness of space. It was a feeling he did not like. With Sergeant Blatchford making him feel a bit better, it did not take long for Marshall to realize he wanted *more* people in his new 'Inner Circle,' even if the big secret was only kept by this new group for a few days.

If Marshall was going to maintain his leadership aboard the station, he would not only need the backing of the military, but also the support of the maintenance crew, without whom the station could not maintain structural safety. One person immediately came to Marshall's mind, a person that he *should* have thought to take into his confidence already: Wesley Maddox. Maddox was the lead designer and construction leader during many years spent in space. Following problems with ground construction and a budget that quickly exceeded planned expectations, many public figures clamored for Maddox to be replaced. Marshall never lost faith in Maddox, though, and that vote of confidence turned into the successful completion of the space station. Marshall could only hope his support of Maddox would translate into returned respect from the former project leader.

All clocks on board the space station were set at U.S. Eastern Standard Time, so most of the passengers were asleep just after three in the morning. Marshall was lucky to go mostly unseen when visiting Sergeant Blatchford a few days earlier, but that luck was more a matter of being in the right place at the right time. Since the

maintenance crew section of the station was on the opposite side of the command center, Marshall would have to plan his movements carefully if his visit to Maddox would go undetected. The last thing he wanted was for passengers to see him visit the former project leader and start spreading rumors, which Marshall had discovered spread quicker on board the station than in the halls of Congress.

Since the majority of the passengers were on board for less than a month, Marshall figured they would still adhere to their normal sleeping schedules from Earth. Having lived aboard the station for a few months already, the former president's body adjusted to the concept that there was no night or day in space. Instead, Marshall learned to sleep when his mind and body told him it was time, not when a clock did. Upon leaving his pod, Marshall found that his planning paid off. The long trek to the other side of the space station took a tenth of the time it normally would have had the corridors been crowded with people. In fact, Marshall only passed one person the entire time, Lillian Edwards, the second-most senior member of the maintenance crew despite being one of the youngest in age. She was used to seeing Marshall, though, and simply offered a polite smile before floating down the hall, not even considering the idea of asking why he was awake and wandering about at this time of night.

*That girl seems to have a good head on her shoulders,* Marshall thought. *Once I get Wesley on board with my new 'Inner Circle,' Maybe I'll recruit her next. Plus, it helps that she respects my privacy and probably knows the ins and outs of the station better than anyone else.*

Before Marshall started considering the third member of his new group, he had to procure the support of the second. A part of him grew nervous about the moment he told Wesley Maddox the truth about the true function of the space station. The man invested so much of his life here but was duped that entire time, a fact that nobody could possibly accept without some kind of hard feelings. But Maddox was an intelligent man, and Marshall hoped that he would understand why there was such a need for secrecy during the entire construction process.

Upon entering Maddox's pod, George Marshall was careful to

make as little noise as possible. He tapped so lightly on Maddox's door that he could barely hear the sound himself. Marshall took little chance at being detected. He hoped Maddox never had the chance the last few months on Earth to adapt to sleeping at night. Or hopefully he was just a light sleeper—

Just when Marshall was sure that he would have to knock harder, Maddox's door opened and the project leader looked surprised to see an unexpected visitor.

"President Marshall, what are you doing here?" he asked.

"Please, Wesley, how many times do I have to ask you? Call me George, I'm no longer the president and titles don't mean much in a place like this," Marshall said. "I didn't wake you, did I?"

"No, sir," Maddox answered. "Would you like to come in?"

Marshall thought that Maddox looked tired, his eyes red and his hair disheveled. He suddenly had second thoughts about choosing this time to tell Maddox, as waking someone up to give him this sort of news might not be the best method.

"Are you sure you weren't sleeping? I don't want to interrupt," Marshall said, now trying to back out.

"George, you've been on the space station for quite awhile now," Maddox said. "If you aren't asleep at this time, then your body has obviously adjusted to sleeping on its own clock. I spent years up here, I know what it's like to sleep on my own schedule. I'm sure you've also realized that living in space takes less of a toll on your body so a person requires fewer hours of sleep. Besides, I never slept well up here and that certainly hasn't changed."

Marshall nodded and entered Maddox's room, relieved to see the project leader close the door behind him.

"What can I do for you?" Maddox asked.

"I was just wondering how you thought the 'Inaugural Month' has been going so far," Marshall asked, trying to feel out Maddox's opinion about life aboard the space station.

"Very well, sir," Maddox answered. "The station has operated the way *McNalley & Jones* and I have planned, which makes me very proud to have worked on its construction. Everything seems to be

running smoothly with the exception of the computer systems, but we had nothing to do with that part of the job. I'm assuming the network and link to Earth is down throughout the entire station?"

"It is," Marshall nodded. "We have our network people currently working on a resolution to the problem. But don't worry, everyone will be writing e-mails to home in no time."

*They will, at least, as soon as I make the announcement,* Marshall thought.

With President Andrew Brighton about to make his doomsday speech to the entire world, Marshall was sure to pull the plug on the connection to Earth, thus cutting off any communication between passengers and the ground. The last thing he needed was to lose control over the information and throw the entire station into disorder. Obviously, once Marshall informed the passengers of the bad news, the Internet connection would be restored. Everyone could then witness the ensuing chaos on Earth while having a chance to say their final goodbyes to loved ones, even if that could only be done by e-mail or video phone.

"The network aside, it's safe to say everyone has been thoroughly impressed with the station and the job you and your crew did," Marshall said. "You are certainly to be congratulated on a job well done."

"Thank you, sir," Maddox said. "That means a lot to me. I'm glad to know I didn't throw ten years of my life away for no reason."

Maddox had every reason to be proud of the results of his hard work, but he'd looked forward to putting the space station behind him and moving on with his life on Earth. After spending so many cold years in space, the project leader—*former* project leader he often pointed out—was planning on finding a nice piece of real estate in a beautiful tropical climate. There were so many nights during space construction that he dreamed about living the relaxed island life, a dream he was determined to make reality. Maddox was already in the early stages of inquiring about the pricing of buying his own island in the Caribbean, where he would love to open and run his own resort. Sure, he was only an engineer and had no experience in the intricacies

of running such a business, but with the millions he had waiting for him in a bank at home, Maddox was sure he could hire some—

“With all of the work you put into the station, I’m surprised I haven’t seen you in the command center,” Marshall said. “Doesn’t your keycard work properly?”

Upon returning to the space station, Marshall made sure Maddox had access to all restricted sections of the station, the same access given to the rest of the maintenance crew. But not only was Maddox uninterested in taking part in safety inspections with Lily and the other crewmembers, he was just as aloof about taking any sort of leadership role aboard the station. As one of the most recognizable faces to take part in the ‘Inaugural Month,’ Maddox remained as reclusive as the former First Lady.

“I assume that the keycard works. But to tell you the truth, I haven’t tried to use it yet,” Maddox admitted. “The space station is complete, which makes me just an observer for the rest of this month.”

“You don’t feel the desire to take a greater role in how things are run?” Marshall asked. “This place is *your* baby, after all.”

Maddox merely shrugged. The certainty Marshall had bringing him into his confidence was quickly waning due to Maddox’s indifference.

“It *was* my baby, but I’m like a proud parent who knows when to let go,” Maddox said. “This station is now the baby of the United States and NASSA, and I know it’s in good hands.”

Marshall was growing more dissuaded with every word Maddox spoke, but he still felt the need to throw one more idea at the former project leader before making his ultimate decision.

“Considering how well things have gone so far, don’t you think everyone on board would want to stay longer than the next few weeks?” Marshall asked.

While Maddox seemed to have a negative response for everything Marshall said so far, he paused for a moment, apparently giving this question serious contemplation. But when he finally answered, George Marshall realized maybe he should have given

Lillian Edwards more consideration as the next member of his new 'Inner Circle.'

"Honestly, sir, I don't know what any of these other people would want," Maddox said. "But if you're asking me, I can't wait until this month ends so I can get off this thing, fly back to Earth and enjoy being on solid ground for the rest of my life."



# CHAPTER TWO

**MAY 30, 2020**

**TWO MONTHS, TWENTY-THREE DAYS UNTIL IMPACT...**

The United States public should have been used to having their regularly scheduled programming interrupted for major presidential announcements. These unanticipated speeches happened numerous times over the past dozen years. Ever since the rediscovery of Comet Clement, Presidents George Marshall and Andrew Brighton unexpectedly addressed the nation numerous times. From the disbanding of the old NASA to the announcement of the space station and the project selection show, Marshall and Brighton used their presidential privilege every time they felt the need for a little airtime of their own. Though it had been scheduled and well-publicized for a week leading up to the event, the ‘space station spectacle’ took the place of the scheduled sitcoms and reality shows just a few months earlier.

President Andrew Brighton sat in front of the television camera, waiting for the moment the light turned red and he went live to the public, wondering if the nation was sick of listening to what he had to say. But considering the message he would give tonight and the backlash soon to follow, Brighton hoped many Americans wouldn’t turn off their TVs before hearing what he had to say. Not that this news would take long to spread around the entire world...

When the light turned red, it was time for Brighton to make the most shocking announcement the world would ever hear.

“My fellow Americans, I come to you tonight with shocking

news.”

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Sarah Rose seemed like she'd been running around the diner for the past three hours but continued to fall behind with every minute that ticked by. For a Saturday night, the joint was hopping and it didn't help that the other waitress supposed to be working called out sick a few minutes before her shift started. The girl's illness was a bit too convenient in Sarah's eyes, especially since she was just talking about how her boyfriend got tickets to some concert and she was trying to find someone else to switch shifts with her. Sarah could have made a big fuss to her boss, but handling all the tables meant she got all the tips. Besides, this wasn't the first time Sarah would deal with a packed house all alone and she knew damn well it wouldn't be the last either.

*Two colas, a water with lemon and a chocolate milk for table six,* Sarah repeated in her head, hurrying over to the drink station. She refused to write down any drink order, relying on her memory since she did not have the time to jot down everything that people ordered. *Two colas, a water with lemon and a chocolate milk for table six. Two colas, a water with—*

“Excuse me, miss, we’ve been waiting for our food for ten minutes already,” a customer at table 12 said as Sarah walked by. “Do you think it will be ready soon?”

Before Sarah had time to answer, the man's wife intervened on Sarah's behalf.

“Harold, calm down, can't you see the girl is busy?” the wife chided her husband.

“But I'm hungry,” Harold answered.

“And she's busy, so just hold your horses and talk to me until it's ready,” the wife said.

“I'm sorry, sir, I'm sure your order will be coming up soon,” Sarah answered.

“That's okay, dear,” the wife answered, much to her husband's

chagrin. "I used to work as a waitress in my younger days, I know how things can get backed up. You just take your time and do what you have to do."

"Thank you," Sarah said.

The truth was, Sarah had no idea how long *any* of the orders were going to take before they were cooked. The last time she'd been in the kitchen, Sarah was dismayed to find most of the kitchen staff huddled around a small black and white TV in the corner. It was announced that regular programming would be interrupted for a speech from President Brighton, who seemed to be on TV quite a bit recently. Sarah concluded that the impending speech must have something to do with the space station and the 'Inaugural Month' that all of the news channels would not shut up about. It was a topic that held little interest for Sarah, though she fully realized that her anger toward space might be a defense mechanism. Every time she heard about the subject, painful memories rushed back to her of the two most important people in her life. Sarah knew that both Josh and Nick would have been enthralled with the whole space station story. Just like everyone else, including the two cooks, the delivery boy and both dishwashers who were *supposed* to be working in the kitchen.

*Two colas, a water with lemon and a chocolate milk for table six,* Sarah told herself as she finally prepared the drink order. Constantly formulating schedules in her mind on how to deal with her tables, Sarah realized that after she dropped off these four beverages, she would head back into the kitchen to see if TV time was over yet. If not, Sarah would either raise some hell until they got back to work or she would jump on the grill and start making orders herself. Again, this would not be the first time she'd be forced to do this.

When she passed table 12, Sarah heard Harold's cell phone ringing and she smiled when she heard the man's wife chastise him for 'not turning that stupid thing off while they were eating.' She looked forward to walking by again and hearing what the wife had to say about her husband actually answering the phone. But in the two minutes it took for Sarah to drop off the four drinks and take table 6's order, the attitude from the couple at 12 changed dramatically.

As Sarah was on her way to get back into the kitchen, Harold hung up his phone and again stopped his waitress. This time, his wife looked shell-shocked and just stared out the dirty window of the diner, mouth agape.

“I’m sorry, ma’am, we’re going to have to cancel our order,” Harold said as he stood up from his table. “Come on, dear, we have to go.”

His wife looked like a zombie and simply nodded her head before standing from the table.

“Please, sir, I’m sorry about the wait but if you just give me a couple minutes, I’ll make sure your food is up next,” Sarah said.

Sarah knew how important it was to avoid the first customer leaving upset because more people were then likely to follow. And with the way the kitchen service was moving so slowly tonight, it was likely that *plenty* of customers weren’t happy with their dining experience.

“I’m sorry,” the man said simply, without a single bit of annoyance or anger in his voice. Sarah sensed that he was leaving because something besides bad service, and her suspicions were confirmed when the man stuck his hand in his pocket, grabbed a small wad of bills and threw the money on the table. He grabbed his wife’s hand and just about dragged her out of the diner.

Sarah watched the couple hurry through the parking lot and she hoped that nothing bad had happened. Having experienced too much tragedy of her own, she was all too familiar with the shocked expression on the wife’s face. But Sarah had too many problems of her own right now to contemplate her past. She had to get orders out now or she was liable to have a diner full of patrons walking out on her. Sarah was so focused on the tongue-lashing she was about to administer to the lazy, TV-watching kitchen staff that she didn’t even notice the fact that half of the restaurant-goers were suddenly on their cell phones.

Sarah swung open the kitchen doors, hoping to find at least one of the cooks working on the long line of tickets. Her worst fears were realized when she found everybody still watching the television and

none of the food even in the beginning stages of preparation. Her bad night instantly changed into a nightmare and Sarah saw no possible way to avoid half of her customers walking out. As she approached the group of workers, she noticed they were all focusing attentively on the tiny screen. In fact, the only noise they made came from Paco, one of the dishwashers, who translated what was being said on TV into Spanish for Carlos, the other dishwasher who did not speak English.

“What the hell is going on back here?” Sarah yelled at the crew, though not one of them turned around to acknowledge her presence. “I have a diner full of hungry, pissed off people who—”

“Shut up,” Carlos said firmly, speaking the only two words of English that he knew.

Sarah was surprised by the usually friendly dishwasher, who always smiled at her when they passed one another. The only other acknowledgement to Sarah standing there was when one of the cooks leaned forward on his tiny stool and turned up the television’s volume. Sarah was surprised to even find her co-workers totally fixated on the president and his update of the space station’s ‘Inaugural Month.’ Not once had she heard anybody at work talk about the space station, maybe except to complain how George Marshall and now Andrew Brighton seemed to take every opportunity to pat themselves on the back.

*Wait, I don’t think anyone else even said that,* Sarah thought. *That was probably what I’ve been trying to tell everyone else.*

This sudden new interest from the kitchen staff about the space station could presumably mean only one thing: bad news. Rather than yell at everyone to get back to work, she did the next best thing. She lowered her shoulder, found a small opening between the much larger men and pushed her way through to the front, where she could also see and hear what was going on.

“While there might be difficult times in front of us, this is a time when humanity has to come together and try to remain calm and peaceful when chaos and turmoil threaten to take over,” President Brighton said. “The United States, as well as many other nations across the globe, will not just sit back and accept our doomed fate. But

I urge every American citizen to prepare for the worst. There will obviously be updates as we learn more information, but again, I thank everyone in advance for their cooperation in following any mandates ordered to keep the peace. Good night America and may God bless us all in the dark days ahead.”

“So what’s the big emergency?” Sarah asked when the image of President Brighton faded to black.

The staff remained deathly silent and continued to stare at the television, completely ignoring Sarah’s question. The way the president spoke, it was like the end of the world was coming or something...

*Oh my God!* Sarah thought when she saw the caption on the news program that followed the president’s speech. It felt like she’d been punched in the stomach, as her mind began to swim when she read those fateful words: ‘COMET TO STRIKE EARTH IN LESS THAN THREE MONTHS.’ At first Sarah thought it must be a joke, like the radio broadcast of *War of the Worlds* over eighty years earlier that tricked thousands of listeners into thinking Martians were attacking. But it did not take long for Sarah to realize the unlikelihood of the President of the United States making such a joke.

Although she now had hundreds of questions rushing to mind, Sarah knew her shocked co-workers were in no mood to be bombarded with inquiries. Her best chance of getting answers were with the stunned news anchors. Television personalities always had something to say, but the bewildered expressions on their faces were matched by their loss for words. Watching these familiar members of the media in such shock made Sarah’s stomach turn even more: this was really happening.

After a long moment of silence, one of the anchors finally found the right words to say, but his dazed voice was barely louder than a whisper. The usually distinguished, impeccable man took off his glasses and stared directly at every person watching the television, not just at the cameras in front of him. For once, the anchorman lost his sense of professionalism and was not afraid to show a hint of fear. Sarah turned the volume up on the TV even louder so none of them

would miss a single word.

“—ladies and gentlemen, there you have it, an announcement that could very well affect every person on the face of Earth. President Brighton has just unleashed a truly shocking development—to say the least—that will be the first true test that modern humanity has ever had to face together, one that we must—and will—overcome, some way, somehow. I would like to take this moment to repeat something that the president said just moments before, a point that must be emphasized, which is that everyone should remain calm during this shocking time. Human nature’s first instinct to such news is obviously panic, but we must stick together and remain composed and united throughout this ordeal.

“We must remain brave and honorable so we can allow those in the position to do so to concentrate on taking care of this problem, without dealing with unnecessary distractions.”

The anchorman replaced the glasses back on his face and lost his expression of worry, once again returning to his all-business demeanor. This man’s confidence snapped his younger colleagues from their own distressed trances. But while the three TV personalities were now containing their emotions, Sarah could not say the same for the people around her. While hearing the potentially deadly news of an impending comet strike made Sarah feel mostly curious—strangely numb, lacking any sort of frightened emotion—it was clear that the men around her did not feel the same. A few of the kitchen staff Sarah always thought as ‘tough guys’ were now openly weeping.

It wasn’t until the newsanchors continued with the specifics of the story that Sarah finally cracked.

“To recap, President Andrew Brighton has just announced that a deep-space comet, approximately two and half kilometers in size, is on a crash course directly with Earth,” the anchorman said.

“According to calculations provided by the president, this comet will strike the earth somewhere in Eastern Russia just a few minutes after noon on August 22 of this year, 2020, less than three months from now. President Brighton has assured the world that everything will be done to stop this cataclysmic event from happening, as many of the

world's top experts on this subject are being gathered to assemble the best plan of action. We are also trying to get experts on the subject to explain to us the following: the consequences of a comet this size striking the Earth, the best possible strategies to combat such a strike or if the calculations of where and when the comet will strike could possibly be off enough so it could miss hitting the planet completely." The anchorman put his hand against his earpiece and stopped speaking momentarily. "I'm being told that we have to take a short break, but please stay tuned for more continuing coverage of Comet Clement."

The last two words struck Sarah's heart and mind like a speeding cannonball and she literally had trouble breathing. She questioned whether or not she heard the television correctly, as all of the other questions about the comet came to a screeching halt when the comet's name registered in her brain.

"What did he say the name of the comet was?" Sarah asked one of the cooks standing closest to her.

"Clement," the man answered. "The president said some guy named Clement—Joe or John or something—"

"Josh?" Sarah asked, saying the single most painful word that she knew.

"Yeah, that was it," the cook continued. "Anyway, this dude Josh Clement discovered the comet like twenty years ago or something. The comet disappeared for a while until it was rediscovered traveling on its new course. Didn't they say a comet wiped out the dinosaurs?"

Sarah now wore the same desperate expression on her face that the rest of the staff did, but she hadn't heard a word the cook said after speaking the words 'Josh Clement.' She thought about that name every single day for the past seventeen years, and was able to do so most of the time without crying. But once she heard the name spoken aloud—for the first time since her brother passed away sixteen years earlier—Sarah could not hold back the tears. Seeing how upset she suddenly became, the cook standing beside Sarah gently placed his arm around her, giving her shoulder a comforting squeeze.



“It’s okay, Sarah,” he said. “President Brighton said they’ll take care of the comet before it hits Earth.”

The comet hurtling on a deadly path toward Earth was a frightening thought, but not grave enough to cause the tears to flow from Sarah’s eyes. Unknown to everyone around her, it was the name of the comet that caused her to break down.

# CHAPTER THREE

Before the commercial break ended, Emily Peterson and her grandmother were surprised to hear a knock at the front door. After hearing the news about Comet Clement, the two were still in shock, neither saying a single word to each other. While the president made it sound like the world could be coming to an end, all Emily could think about was whether she would have to keep going to school for the next few months. The tears now streaming down her grandmother's face told Emily that the older woman was thinking of the bigger picture.

"Now who could that be?" her grandmother said, vainly trying to wipe away the tears.

"I don't know, grandmother," Emily answered.

It wasn't like they were close with any of their neighbors—in fact, it was just the opposite. Emily's grandmother never stopped herself from yelling at the neighborhood kids who sometimes wandered onto her lawn to retrieve a ball. And besides Emily's deceased mother, her grandmother only had one other child, but he lived all the way across the country. Emily had no close friends who came to the house and the only other people who ever knocked on the door were the mailman and the paperboy.

"Don't just sit there, answer the door," Emily's grandmother told her. "I can't very well let anyone see me looking like such a mess."

Emily was amazed that her grandmother could worry so much about what she looked like at this moment, the one time in everyone's life when public displays of anguish were justifiable. But getting into an argument of logic with the old woman was futile, especially since the person waiting outside grew impatient and knocked a second time. Emily grabbed her nearby crutches and slid her arms into them as she got up from the couch.

"Make sure you check to see who it is before unlocking the door," her grandmother called from across the living room. "Looters won't take long to realize nobody will be regulating laws anymore. I don't think a crippled girl or an old woman could put up much of a fight."

Emily shuddered at the word 'crippled,' a politically incorrect term that her grandmother did not find offensive. The continuous knocking on the door stopped *that* argument from starting for the millionth time. When Emily pulled aside the curtain on the door, the first thing she noticed was the green Humvee parked on the street in front of the house. Even stranger were the four men—one who really looked out of place—standing on the porch.

"Well? Who is it?" her grandmother asked after Emily stared outside for a few long seconds. "They sure aren't polite with all that loud banging."

"It looks like the military," Emily said. "And some weird-looking guy with them."

"The military?" Emily's grandmother asked, sounding just as confused as Emily felt. "See what they want already."

Emily opened the door and the smallest of the four men—the only civilian of the bunch—stepped forward and read from a list.

"Are you Emily Peterson?" he asked.

"Yes," she answered, wondering if she was doing the safe thing by speaking to these men.

"May I come in to speak with you and your grandmother?" the man asked.

"I don't know if I should," Emily said. "My grandmother doesn't allow strangers in the house."

“Don’t worry, my men will wait outside,” the civilian answered. Emily glanced at the three other men, who stood as still and stony-faced as statues. “Is your grandmother home? If I could speak with her for a moment, I think she’ll understand the importance of this situation.”

“She’s here...who are you?” Emily asked.

The man extended his hand, which Emily took hesitantly and carefully, making sure to keep her balance.

“My name is Peter Mansfield. I was the White House Chief of Staff for eight years under President George Marshall,” Mansfield explained, trying to ease the girl’s skepticism. “I’m currently a special assistant to Andrew Brighton.”

“You work for the president?” Emily asked, surprised that such an unimpressive looking man could hold such a powerful position.

“Yes I do.”

“I just saw him on TV,” Emily said. “If you’ve been driving around, have you heard about the comet yet?”

“That’s actually the reason I’m here,” Mansfield said.

“Because of the comet? Could it really be as dangerous as the president made it seem?” Emily asked.

Mansfield glanced for a moment at the three military men before turning back toward Emily.

“It would be better if you, me and your grandmother spoke privately,” Mansfield said.

Emily nodded and finally opened the door all the way, giving Mansfield access to the house. When Emily closed the door, she saw her grandmother emerge from the restroom, her tears gone, the previously streaky makeup now perfectly reapplied. After Emily made a quick introduction and Peter Mansfield gave his credentials, Emily’s grandmother showed her guest to the living room and offered him something to drink.

“No thank you, ma’am,” Mansfield said. “I don’t have much time. As I’m sure you’ve gathered from President Brighton’s announcement, we are facing some frightening times in the days ahead. Believe me, if you saw my schedule, you would know how

hectic things are going to get.”

“Okay, Mr. Mansfield. Why have you come here today?” the older woman asked.

“First of all, I’d like to ask you to keep what I say between the three of us,” Mansfield said. “If what I’m about to tell you got out to the rest of the public, the ensuing chaos might be more than the government could handle.”

“We will be discreet, don’t you agree, dear?” Emily’s grandmother said sweetly—a little *too* sweetly due to their present company.

“I can keep a secret,” Emily replied simply.

Mansfield nodded his head before continuing.

“President Brighton made the situation seem a little more... hopeful than it probably is,” Mansfield said. “In reality, the comet is a *very* dangerous threat, one that we will have great trouble trying to stop.”

“Oh no,” Emily’s grandmother said, a little too overdramatically. “That’s terrible.”

“As the president said, everything will be done to avoid this catastrophe, but steps must be taken to plan for the worst,” Mansfield explained.

“We’ll do anything to help, but I can’t think what *we* could possibly contribute,” the older woman said.

“Unfortunately, there’s not much we can do but utilize the resources already at our disposal, the main one being the space station,” Mansfield said. “In the worst case scenario, we can at least have representatives of humankind on board to continue the human race.”

“I see,” Emily’s grandmother said. “I suppose it’s a good thing the space station is now functional, but I still don’t understand why you’re here to share this news with my granddaughter and me.”

“Well, ma’am, the space station is not yet at maximum capacity, and it is my job to gather the final recipients for spots on board,” Mansfield explained. “And I am here to extend an invitation to Emily Peterson. She has been selected to help in the continuation of

humankind should the comet hit Earth.”

Peter Mansfield and Emily’s grandmother both looked at the teenage girl, who was shocked beyond words. When the original randomly selected Americans were chosen a few months earlier, Emily never considered the possibility that she could be picked. And now moments after the President of the United States unleashed the most earth shattering news in the history of the world, Emily was being given the opportunity to survive. The roller coaster of emotions was incredibly intense, but now that she reached the peak, Emily felt that she could go nowhere but down. She refused to believe that fate would ever allow her happiness; she would soon find out her grandmother would do everything to stop that as well.

“But why Emily?” the old woman asked, when words finally came to her. “It’s pretty obvious to see that the girl is handicapped. Don’t you think it would be wiser for someone more physically gifted to go?”

“Grandmother!” Emily yelled, more out of embarrassment than her grandmother attempting to deny her the chance of survival. “I am more than capable of going. I’m not as worthless as you think.”

“I’m just making sure they knew about your handicap before they chose you,” she said.

Mansfield sensed the younger girl’s anger and frustration and intervened before there was a full-scale family war.

“We’re well aware of the challenges Emily will have to face, but I have little doubt she will overcome any obstacles that come her way,” Mansfield said.

With Mansfield fully declared in his support of Emily, the grandmother now became defensive when she felt the other two ganging up on her. She turned toward Emily and shook her head.

“I don’t think it’s a smart idea for you to go,” she told the girl.

“I don’t care what you think,” Emily said. “I want to go and that’s all that matters.”

“How dare you speak to me that way?” her grandmother yelled, finally dropping the friendly façade in front of their guest. “I have taken care of you for years when you had no other place to go. I am

your legal guardian and you are not yet of age, therefore this is my decision. I still have a say in your life and I say that you're not going."

Short on time and long on work, Mansfield stepped into the family argument and gave Emily the final word, much to the dismay of the older woman.

"As a matter of fact, ma'am, neither one of you ladies has a say in this matter," Mansfield explained. "I'm saying that Emily is coming and I am given this authority by the President of the United States. If it comes down to it, I will ask the three gentlemen waiting outside for assistance in this matter. Now Emily, please go upstairs, pack only a few things and let's go."

Emily happily struggled up the stairs, leaving Mansfield and the grandmother with a long uncomfortable silence, in which time the older woman started to cry. There was a part of Mansfield that pitied the old woman, who would now be left alone in the world. But the selfish way she seemed willing to sacrifice her granddaughter to the comet was shameful, leaving Mansfield to wonder about the hardships Emily faced while growing up around such a woman. It was rare that he thought of Neil Peterson—a man he'd had trouble trusting with the probe intercept—but Peter now felt proud that he was saving the little girl of the brave astronaut who'd given up his life.

Emily descended the steps a few minutes later with a bulging backpack strapped to her back.

"I'm ready," she said to Mansfield, a new aura of self-confidence surrounding her since she'd be leaving the tyrannical rule of her grandmother.

"Emily, please, you mustn't leave me alone," her grandmother pleaded, tears continuing to stream down her face.

"Thank you for everything you've given me," Emily said, kissing the old woman on the cheek. "But I hope one day you'll realize this was best for me."

With that said, Emily followed Peter Mansfield outside, where the three military men led them into the waiting Humvee. A few of the neighbors were already gathered outside, undoubtedly speaking about the comet, all now staring in Emily's direction. But Emily only

had one thought on her mind: her father, and the way she would be going into outer space, something he'd never been able to do.

"Don't worry, I'm sure your grandmother will be okay. Once the comet is destroyed, the two of you will be together again," he lied, knowing there was no chance of that every happening.

"I wasn't worried about that," Emily said. "I wasn't even thinking about that. I was just thinking of my dad. Did you know he used to work for NASA?"



# CHAPTER FOUR

Colin McKay's eyes eventually began to water, but they weren't tears of fright or worry or fear. Instead, they were watering because he stared at the television—without blinking—for nearly an hour since President Brighton made the shocking announcement to the world about the impending comet strike. He still could not believe what he was hearing, this news sounding like the plot of one of those corny science-fiction movies that his best friend always watched. While this situation was anything but fantasy, Colin felt a bit at ease considering all of those movies had ended well, with the comet being destroyed before entering Earth's atmosphere. He could only hope real life turned out as well.

Every television station switched over to the coverage of this story—all 220 channels—most of which intercepted the feed from one of the major networks. Coverage of the 'Comet Clement Catastrophe' eventually snowballed into every possible angle of the story. Although the story was only an hour old, dozens of experts from around the country were already receiving airtime.

The first person interviewed by one of the networks came on the air just ten minutes after President Brighton finished making his speech. An Astronomy Professor from a well-to-do Ivy League university, Dr. Franz St. Louis held no punches when interviewed about the impact a comet strike could have on Earth.

"A comet hurtles through space at hundreds of thousands of meters per second," Dr. St. Louis explained. "Compare this to the velocity of a speeding bullet, which is only about 3,000-5,000 meters per second, at the most. So while the Earth might be massive

compared to the 2.5-kilometer comet, just consider the fact that an unmoving bullet appears quite unimpressive in comparison to a human being. But we all know what happens when a human is shot by a speeding bullet. It isn't pretty, and if this comet does strike Earth, I promise you things will get very ugly, very quickly."

"Tell us, Dr. St. Louis, in your professional opinion, what sort of toll would a comet strike mean for the earth and humanity?" the anchorman asked.

"That question I can not answer with full certainty," the doctor said. "There has not been a significant comet strike on this planet for thousands of years, so there has not been much evidence to study. But assuming the worst—an assumption that seems very likely—a strike as large as Clement could very well lead to the annihilation of 95 percent of the world's animals, human beings included."

Colin had trouble contemplating such dire consequences, as did the anchorman, whose surprise at the doctor's prediction caused a longer-than-usual pause between his line of questioning.

"So you're saying that the devastation caused by Comet Clement could result in the end of humanity?" the anchor finally asked.

"Dinosaurs roamed the earth for almost 200 million years, while human beings have only been around for approximately 6,000 years," St. Louis explained. "It only took one comet to kill off that species, so it would be naïve to think the same could not happen to us. While the immediate devastation from the comet will be enough to kill millions, the longer-term effects will be what ultimately destroys the rest of us."

"And what effects would those be?" the anchor asked.

"Once the global shockwave sweeps across the planet, massive tsunamis will soon follow, not to mention the millions of pounds of dirt and dust that will be hurled into the Earth's skies. A constant dark cloud will hang over the planet for—and this is only an estimation—three or four years, conservatively. The immediate explosion of heat from the comet—and the volcanic eruptions likely to follow—will superheat the planet for a short period of time, destroying all plant

and animal life that does not have a place to hide. But this dust cloud eventually formed will be thick enough to block out all sunlight and heat, thus plunging the globe into another Ice Age. The plants and vegetation lucky enough to survive initial impact will quickly wilt under the following iciness and will cut off the food supply to animals, thus killing them off as well. With no plants and no animals, the remaining human population will eventually die off of starvation, especially with the lack of proper medical care.

“The lack of shelter will also inflict its deadly toll on humankind, as most of the homes and buildings will be destroyed or quickly deteriorate. Considering the lack of proper shelter and the destructive environment, people will die from exposure before they even—”

Colin finally changed the channel, having no desire to continue listening to the doomsday prophecies. After all, President Brighton seemed hopeful during his speech that the world would come together and figure out a way to deal with this. As far as Colin was concerned, focusing on all the negatives was counterproductive to the chance of coming up with a solution.

The next channel Colin flipped to also focused on the dreadful consequences of a comet strike rather than ways to avoid such a disaster. Though the breaking news story was only an hour old, this particular station already created a detailed computer-simulated animation of what a comet impact might resemble. A birdseye view of the globe was shown as a comet struck Eastern Russia, a red wave of fire spreading across Earth in the simulated time of only twenty minutes.

Yet another news station interviewed more experts from NASSA and other prestigious universities and government agencies. Most seemed to agree on a single belief of what would result from the impact of Comet Clement: global destruction and eventual human extinction. Despite the president’s assertion that the world need not panic yet, every implication from experts indicated the exact opposite. For once, Colin wished his father were home so he’d have someone to discuss all of this with, especially since Colin could not get in contact

with John the last hour. He'd dialed John's phone number almost immediately after President Brighton went off the air—as well as every five minutes since that time—but the phone lines did not seem to be working.

Colin eventually gave up making the call, figuring he would see John the next day anyway. Ever since John's father disappeared a few weeks earlier (having taken some mysterious trip to an unknown location), Colin spent most of his free time hanging out at the Fare mansion. Strangely enough, John even went to school on time with Colin every day since Mr. Fare left.

When Colin heard the familiar sound of a pickup truck smashing into the aluminum trash cans outside, it was the first time he actually felt relieved that his father was home. It was still relatively early in the night—hours before Colin's dad usually stumbled home from the bar—so he hoped his father would be somewhat lucid so they could discuss tonight's shocking revelation. It didn't take long to realize that his father's mind was as cloudy as the earth's atmosphere would be one day.

“What are you still doing up, boy?” his father slurred as he stumbled into the living room. “I told you to be in bed by ten o'clock.”

“I haven't gone to bed at ten o'clock since I was in junior high,” Colin answered. His father sometimes drank until he forgot what year it was. For his father to be this drunk, this early, Colin knew his old man was drinking the hard stuff, not his usual dozen beers. Liquor usually meant Colin's father would not be in a good mood at all. “Besides, it isn't even ten o'clock yet.”

“Maybe you should be getting to bed at nine-thirty then,” his father mumbled angrily.

“That's ridiculous, I'm almost eighteen years old,” Colin said, blowing off his father's drunken rants. “Besides, I haven't stopped watching the news about the comet. Did you see it at the bar?”

“Are you talking back to me, boy?” his father yelled. “You think you're so smart that you can talk to me any way you want. Maybe you should be thinking twice before saying something bad to me.”

Colin could not believe—especially under these circumstances

—that his father was blowing up over nothing. This was the most shocking night in human history, the one night when the two of them should have spoken to one another like normal human beings, yet his father was getting mad because Colin did not adhere to the bedtime set for him when he was ten years old?

“Look, I’m not trying to make you mad or anything,” Colin said apologetically, hoping his father would calm down so they could discuss what they would do to prepare for the impact. “But there are more important things to talk about tonight. This comet strike seems like it’s really going to happen. I think we’d better think of a plan to deal with the worst-case scenario. I don’t know how much of the news you caught after the president’s speech, but most experts think the comet could wipe out every human on Earth.”

The anger on his father’s face softened for a second and there was a flash of clarity in his eye. But that only lasted a moment before he looked at his son the way an officer of the law would look at a murderer.

“What are you trying to say, boy? That I don’t understand what’s going on? That I’m too stupid to realize the world is in trouble?” his father continued to yell. “You ain’t in that fancy school no more, you can’t pretend like you more smart than me.”

Colin couldn’t take this absurd argument any longer.

“What is your problem?” Colin yelled back, taking an aggressive step toward his father, who no longer loomed menacingly over him. “I’m trying to talk to you like a normal human being about the biggest thing to ever happen in your life or mine. And all you want to do is start an argument about nonsense?”

“Fine, boy, stay up as late as you want,” his father said. “Why do I even care?”

Colin’s father stumbled off into the kitchen, the *cracking* sound of an opening beer can not long behind. Colin sat back down on the couch and focused his attention on the news. With his father already in a drunken stupor, Colin realized that he would not be talking with anyone sober tonight about the comet. He would try to learn as much about Clement as possible before discussing it with John tomorrow.

Father rejoined son in the living room and collapsed into his favorite rickety chair.

“Ain’t nothing else on? I’m tired of seeing this same crap on TV all night,” his father complained. “Ain’t nobody even saying nothing new.”

This particular news story involved an on-site reporter outside of NASSA’s main headquarters giving a report about the space station agency’s official word on Comet Clement. According to a public relations worker, the people aboard the space station were already informed of the approaching comet and had unanimously voted to stay aboard the station until a plan was figured out.

“Give me the remote, boy,” Colin’s father ordered, placing his beer dangerously close to the edge of the dilapidated coffee table. “I don’t feel like watching this garbage no more than what I have to.”

It was ludicrous to Colin how his father could be so uninterested in something so extraordinarily important.

“Aren’t you scared about this whole thing?” Colin asked. “This comet is going to hit in less than three months and everything and everyone you know could be destroyed.”

“You sound like a scared woman to me right now, boy,” his father said. “This comet thing ain’t even real, mark my words. It’s just some more rubbish the government is trying to scare us with so they can control everyone.”

“Do you *really* believe that?” Colin asked, shaking his head. He sincerely wondered whether his father would have thought the same thing had he not been sloshed. “You actually think there’s some sort of conspiracy going on?”

“You don’t know about these things, boy,” his father said. “I wouldn’t expect you to understand, neither.”

“I can’t believe that someone could actually think that way,” Colin said, shaking his head in disbelief, a gesture that was angering his father. At this moment, though, he did not care how furious his dad became. “The world could be ending and you sit there and convince yourself this whole thing is a hoax. You want to know what I think?”

“Not really,” his father said.

“I think you’re using this insane conspiracy theory as a defense mechanism,” Colin said.

“Look at the fancy school boy using his fancy school terms,” his father said. “I don’t even know what you just said, but I’m sure it didn’t make no sense.”

“A defense mechanism,” Colin repeated. “You are scared about this comet, but you convince yourself it’s all a hoax by the government so you can deal with your fear.”

Now that his father understood that Colin was insulting him, he stood from his chair—knocking over his beer in the process—and used the only thing against his boy that he could: his physical presence.

“I ain’t scared of nothing, boy,” the older man yelled. “You just remember everything I’ve seen and everything I’ve done in my life. This little hoax by the president ain’t nothing that’s going to make me afraid.”

“I’m afraid and I’m sure every other *logical* person in the world is, too,” Colin said.

“Go get me another beer then, scaredy-cat,” his father said, picking up the empty beer can and throwing it at Colin. Colin, whose baseball reflexes had not slowed despite his broken hand, simply swatted the can away.

“You knocked it over, you get a new one,” he said defiantly.

“Look who thinks he’s a tough guy now,” his father said mockingly. “The little pansy who cries whenever he hears something bad on the TV. I never should have expected you to act like a man about it.”

Through his father’s long years of drinking, Colin grew mostly immune to the mental abuse. He ignored most of what his old man said, but even Colin could be pushed over the edge.

“A man? That’s what you think you are?” Colin yelled back as he stood up and looked down at his shorter father. “You’re nothing but a waste of life and if I was you, I’d be happy a comet was coming to kill me, too.”

For once, Colin saw a look of profound sadness on his father’s

face. But just before he was about to apologize, Colin's father smacked him right across the face. Colin's immediate reaction was to strike back—the exact reaction his father was trying to elicit from him—but Colin controlled his temper. He was tired of growing up in a household where violence was used to solve problems. He wanted to prove to his father that he was the better man by showing restraint. Besides, his hand was still sore from the last time he'd gotten into a fight and lost his cool.

"Just because I'm afraid of the comet doesn't mean I'm *ever* going to be afraid of you again," Colin said, smiling at his father in an attempt to enrage him.

"You'll get into fights at school with boys smaller than you but you're afraid of a real man," his father said, apparently misinterpreting Colin's reluctance to act. "I can't believe I raised such a punk. I knew I should've gotten rid of you when that whore of a wife of mine left us."

Colin had a lot of pent-up anger issues toward his mother, who left when Colin was very young. While he never had much reason to stick up for her before, he wasn't about to sit still and let his father blame everything on her.

"I can't blame her for leaving a drunk like you," he said. "I only wish she'd taken me with her so I could've gotten away from you."

No longer having the element of surprise on his side, Colin's father's second attempt to strike his son was not nearly swift enough. Colin blocked the slap and applied a vice-like grip on his old man's wrist, squeezing as hard as he could until he felt the strength quickly sap from his father. Now that his dad was in a defenseless position—the same defenseless position Colin found himself in hundreds of times during his life—Colin felt the desire to unleash seventeen years of frustration. While the thought of revenge made his boiling blood course quicker through his body, Colin recognized an emotion in his father's eyes he'd never before seen: fear.

"I'm better than you," Colin said simply, as he pushed his father backward, the old man collapsing into his chair.

All of the anger Colin felt toward his father suddenly



evaporated when he realized he was *nothing* like his father in any way possible, that he was a far better person no matter how hard his father tried to bring him down.

“Get the hell out of my house,” his father said. It was the first time the old man gave him an order that did not sound the least bit threatening.

“With pleasure,” Colin said.

As he walked out of the house and crossed his lawn, Colin took one final glance at the place where he’d spent most of his life. With the comet strike looming in the next few months and an apology from his father highly unlikely, Colin would not ever step foot in this neighborhood again. He had a moment of regret, especially when he saw his father step outside the front door. But as expected, his old man’s final words were the furthest possible thing from an apology.

“You’re the worst kid I could’ve hoped to get,” his father yelled, loud enough to make sure all the neighbors could hear. “And make sure you never come back here again.”

It didn’t take long for Colin to wish he’d gotten in contact with John. Having to walk all the way across town in the middle of the night was not a predicament he was glad to be in, especially since he knew John would have been more than willing to take the drive. With Mr. Fare gone indefinitely, Colin knew John would be glad to have company in that big mansion, even if it was just for the final few months before Clement struck.

Still, Colin took a refreshing breath of night air and felt free for the first time.

# CHAPTER FIVE

Tyler Ainsworth sat on the balcony of his second-floor motel room, enjoying the peaceful crashing of the Pacific Ocean waves. It felt strange that on this particular night—the most emotionally chaotic night for humankind—the waves and the ocean could be so relaxing to Tyler. He knew this mellowness would not be lasting much longer and that his life was about to make a serious change.

Not only had Tyler waited for this night since being visited by James Armour and Peter Mansfield but it was also the moment Tyler had been building toward since dreaming up the idea of a seacraft. And now that he stared out at the waters where he'd be seeking refuge, Tyler could not imagine a better setting for where he'd want to spend the next years of his life.

It was the middle of the night, but Tyler could still see his seacraft in the light of the moon, which illuminated the craft now floating on top of the ocean's surface. The boat was brought to the surface numerous times before, but this was the first night Tyler didn't have to worry about whether anyone saw his creation.

When he heard the knock at his room door, he sighed, realizing this was the end of his relaxation. Now would begin his final drive to survival.

"The passengers are gathered in the lobby, as you requested," said Marc Hudson, Tyler's personal assistant.

"And everything is set up outside?" Tyler asked.

"Yes, sir," Marc answered. "Everything has been arranged exactly as you ordered."

"Good, good. So, how is everybody taking the news?" Tyler asked.

Many of Tyler's passengers were told about the comet so the president's announcement should not have been shocking. But plenty of spots aboard the seacraft were bought for family members who had to be kept in the dark about Clement. Tyler did not know whether his investors stayed true to their word and kept the comet a secret from their loved ones, but nothing was leaked to the press, and that was all Tyler could hope for.

"A few of the wives and children seem nervous, but most realized something was going on and that this was no normal vacation," Marc reported. "Especially since some of the country's most powerful people have been hanging around this dinky motel for the past two weeks."

"As long as everyone remains relaxed, we should have no problem getting all the passengers on board later tonight," Tyler said. "I just wish Armour and Mansfield hadn't told me a few days when they really meant a few weeks. It's a good thing my investors didn't call me crazy and walk out of here a week ago."

"So, that's it? You're not going to give me any kind of explanation?" Marc asked.

"You lied to me for years about the seacraft's purpose and on the day I find out the world is ending, you go about your business as usual?"

Although Marc was Tyler's most trusted employee, the personal assistant was never told of the real reason for the construction of the seacraft. At least not by Tyler.

"I didn't know my actions required explanation," Tyler said. "But as I'm sure you've realized by now, I've known all along about the existence of the comet."

"The whole time I thought we were building the world's first underwater cruise line—how *stupid* could I have been?—and yet we were creating an underwater shelter," Marc said, more of a statement than a question. "How did you find out about the comet in the first place?"

"A high-ranking government official confided in me years ago," Tyler lied. "I was sworn to secrecy, which was the reason I never shared it with you."

"I see," Marc responded. "Well, should I tell the guests that you'll be coming down to address them now?"

"That's it?" Tyler asked. "Now that I can finally answer questions, you only ask one thing?"

"There's nothing else to ask, sir," Marc answered.

In reality, Marc also knew about the comet for quite some time, having been told of its existence by Nigel Huffington, the very man who informed Tyler of Clement's existence. Anyway, Tyler had treated him far better in recent months than he had in all the years Marc worked for him, which made the personal assistant—and more importantly, his spot on board—feel more secure.

"I trust your judgment, Tyler," Marc continued. "You've never steered me wrong before. If keeping the comet a secret was in our best interests, then that's what you had to do. I would be lying if I said I didn't feel a little embarrassed that many of your investors knew about the comet and I didn't, but my pride will always take a backseat to what you think is best."

Of course Marc did not believe a single word he said, but he would take every opportunity to make his boss feel as guilty as possible about keeping everything a secret from him.

"Thank you, Marc," Tyler said. "I appreciate the confidence you have in my decision-making abilities. Tell the guests I'll be down momentarily."

Marc nodded and left Tyler alone in his room. Tyler figured his assistant was still in a state of shock about the comet.

*Wait until he figures out that he doesn't have a spot on board the seacraft, Tyler thought. Then he'll really be shocked.*

Even though Tyler smiled at this thought, a small part of his conscience felt bad about what he had to do to Marc, yet not so bad that he second-guessed the decision he made. Difficult times called for difficult choices, and Tyler did not regret selling Marc's spot on board in order to gain the funds to finish construction on the seacraft.

*Who knows? Maybe Marc will get lucky and one of the passengers won't show up, Tyler considered, even if the chances of that happening were remote.*

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The motel's lobby was barely large enough to hold the 100 passengers. Space was tight, the tension level was high (especially from those who'd just learned about the comet) and these were not the type of people used to being kept waiting.

"What is going on, Jeremy?" asked Monica Walker, the beautiful wife of the recently retired baseball star. "We haven't been sitting around this dump for weeks for no reason."

"Don't worry," he answered. "You'll find out soon enough."

"But if you already know something, I want to know about it *now*," she said in the familiar nagging voice used when she didn't get her way. Jeremy already tuned out the whiny voice and was busy staring at the only woman in the room more beautiful than his wife. Monica was no fool, and looked in the direction where her husband gawked like a hormonal schoolboy.

"You know she's totally fake," she said to her husband, who still ignored her while staring at Heather Sanders, the Hollywood actress. Sanders was standing by herself in the corner of the lobby, but Jeremy's wife could see that her husband wasn't the only man staring at the actress. Monica Walker was used to the attention being on her, especially from her husband.

"Hey, eyes over here," she said, snapping her fingers directly in front of Jeremy's face. "You told me the other day that you didn't think Heather Sanders is that pretty."

"I don't, dear," Jeremy said, trying his hardest to avoid sneaking another peek at Heather. "Besides, she's way too young for me."

In the mood his wife was now in, making any sort of comment about her age (she was only 31) was not the brightest idea. Jeremy realized this as the words escaped his mouth, but he didn't even have time to explain himself before Monica attacked.

"And I'm too *old*?" she wondered. "Is that what you're implying?"

"No, baby, I didn't mean it that way," Jeremy said. "I mean,

look at her..." He used this as an excuse to look at Heather again. "She's..." *Beautiful, sexy and best of all, she's not chewing my ear off*, Jeremy thought, though he really said, "...young enough to almost be my daughter."

They both knew that wasn't true, but it seemed to appease Monica anyway. Thankfully she let the topic go.

"Are you going to tell me the whole story about this comet or not?" she asked.

Across the room, Heather Sanders began to wonder whether boarding this seacraft was her best option. Though her recent success in movies made her as famous as just about everyone else in this lobby, she could not help feeling a bit intimidated by those around her. With the exception of the handful of kids, Heather was by far the youngest person in the entire lobby, and she could feel the eyes of older men gazing in her direction. It didn't matter that these were some of the most powerful men in the country; they still stared at her like they were at a single's bar, regardless that most of the men had their wives standing next to them.

One guy in particular continued to stare at her, even though his wife clearly saw him doing so and gave Heather a dirty look for her husband's actions. The man looked vaguely familiar to Heather—she thought he was some sort of athlete, though she wasn't big into sports—but the look she got from him gave her the chills. She had the feeling being cooped up in a confined space with this guy could one day cause trouble. Since President Brighton seemed confident that Comet Clement would be stopped, Heather wondered if it might be safer for her to stay off the seacraft and wait out the problem.

"Heather, I'm glad to see you arrived safely," a heavily accented voice said behind her.

When Heather turned around, she saw yet another man looking at her. But there was no lust in the eyes of Gaspare Carollo, nor any jealousy in the eyes of the man's wife, a former actress herself. Although Heather always had great respect for the successful movie producer, it wasn't until she met him that she became fond of him as a person. The two met when Tyler Ainsworth gathered them for the

meeting when he sold seats aboard the seacraft. It had been a nerve-wracking day for Heather, but Carollo befriended her and the two stayed in touch afterward. They even reached a deal for Heather to star in Carollo's next picture, though that was on the condition that the comet strike did not happen, which now seemed a likelihood.

"Mr. Carollo, when did you arrive?" Heather asked. Since she arrived at the small motel in upstate Washington, Heather had not seen Carollo a single time.

"Last night," he said. "I had some final business to attend before I could come. I was starting to doubt whether I should come at all, since the announcement took so long. But now I'm glad I came when I did. With all of the confusion that's bound to happen, who knows if the airline flights will continue as normal."

"I've also been wondering whether I should stay," Heather admitted. "There were a lot of cranky rich people here the past ten days."

"It appears as though Mr. Ainsworth's warning has come true," Carollo said. "It's still shocking, whether we knew it was going to happen or not."

"To tell you the truth, I'm still having doubts about boarding this seacraft," Heather said. "President Brighton doesn't seem as worried about the comet strike as Ainsworth does. I'm not sure how safe the seacraft technology is; nobody really knows if this ship has been properly tested."

"You must not leave, dear," Carollo said, clearly concerned.

The worry in the older man's voice reminded Heather how her grandfather sounded when warning her against going to Hollywood to seek an opportunity in the entertainment business.

"I know that leaving here seems like a risk, but, Andrew Brighton sounded certain that a serious crisis can still be averted."

Carollo shook his head, a bit of a smile appearing on his face despite sounding so concerned just seconds earlier.

"My dear, can you name the last motion picture I produced that ended up flopping at the box office?" he asked.

Heather was confused at first. But after several moments of

thinking, she could not come up with the answer.

“I don’t think you *have* made a movie that wasn’t extremely successful,” she said.

“And why do you think that is?” he asked.

“Because you’re a genius when it comes to every step involved in making movies,” Heather answered, bringing a wide grin to Carollo’s face.

“Such a sweet girl, but I’m no more a genius than most everyone involved in the process,” Carollo said. “But there is one thing I do that has made me a very wealthy man over the years, one particular skill that came in handy just a few hours ago. It also convinced me that boarding this seacraft is the only way to survive. I can *always* tell when someone will be right for a role.”

Carollo stopped talking like Heather was going to come to some big epiphany, but she was more perplexed than before he started.

“But what does your skill have to do with the president’s announcement?” Heather asked.

“When Brighton said that the comet situation was likely to be resolved, I could tell that he was bad for the role of a confident man,” Carollo said. “He may as well have worn a sign on his forehead saying he’s a liar.”

“How could you tell?”

“The same way I could tell that I had the right actors for the six movies I produced that won Best Picture awards,” Carollo said. “Mark my words: President Brighton was not telling the truth. The world is in trouble, and this seacraft opportunity is our only chance of survival.”

It was hard to argue with Carollo’s logic, especially when he seemed so passionate. Heather still was not certain that she would stay, but she was much more convinced about the danger with the comet than before her discussion with the movie producer.

At the front of the room, the richest man in the entire motel tried avoiding contact with the other guests. Bernard Jones made many enemies during his quest to becoming the country’s wealthiest person, angering many in the public and private sectors of business,



not to mention the United States government. The owner of an insanely successful computer software firm, Jones had a small problem that living aboard the seacraft certainly wouldn't help: he hated people. He didn't mind if people in this room hated him, but he abhorred that everyone who spoke to him here tried to act friendly.

"You hate me, and I don't especially like you, so let's not even attempt this cordial charade," he told one of the other guests the first day his family returned to the motel.

His family was another growing headache he'd endured, as their second unexplained trip to this secluded motel—'hellhole,' as both his wife and daughter referred to it—led to more arguments with his wife and whining from his two children. Bernard's wife and daughter were unbearable during their weeks of waiting. At least his son had been open to taking walks along the shoreline to watch the sunset over the Pacific. Of course Bernie Jr. whined that his feet hurt after walking for more than five minutes, not to mention his complaints about the 'funky' smell of the ocean.

To make matters worse, the one person Bernard could hang out with still hadn't arrived. After all the strings he pulled to get the CEO of his company a spot onboard, Jones could not believe he hadn't shown up, especially considering the \$5 million he paid for that seat. Careful to avoid eye contact with everyone he wanted to avoid, Bernard Jones scanned the large crowd for his CEO.

"Who are you looking for?" his wife asked.

*Someone I can talk to without hearing complaints,* he thought.

"Nobody, dear," he answered. In truth, Jones would not feel comfortable on board the seacraft *without* his CEO there with him, watching his back. There was no telling how many passengers aboard the seacraft would be gunning for him, leaving Jones the strong need for an ally. Hopefully, his CEO would protect him on the craft the same way he protected him in the business world.

"Are you going to tell me why we're still staying here?" his wife whined. "With this comet coming, we don't have time to waste sitting around this dinky motel."

"I know, Daddy," Bernard's daughter said, the whine in her

voice the exact annoying pitch of her mother. “We have to, like, totally get out of here so we can get home safely before all the nutjobs start attacking everyone. You know there’s probably going to be, like, riots and stuff.”

“Duh! Dad obviously knew something about the comet before we came here,” BJ said. “All of the famous people here have something to do with how we’re going to survive the comet strike.”

A part of Bernard felt proud that his son was intelligent enough to see through his lies and figure out the purpose for being here. But at the same time, Bernard was relieved that his wife and daughter had not yet figured out the truth. With the facts out in the open, Bernard Jones knew that the number of complaints from his two girls would soon reach an all-time high.

“Is this true?” his wife asked, a tone of accusation mixed in with her usual whining.

Bernard was saved from the inquisition by the sudden appearance of Tyler Ainsworth’s assistant. Marc emerged from the staircase to the wonderment of the crowd, which suddenly became silent upon his arrival. After all, Marc was the one who gathered everyone together for a big announcement from Tyler. But when the crowd saw him alone, the noise started back up again, questions firing in his direction. Luckily for Bernard, he was the closest to Marc.

“Where is Tyler? When is he going to get this little shindig underway?” Bernard asked.

“Mr. Ainsworth will be down momentarily,” Marc answered.

“Does this mean we finally get to board the seacraft tonight?” he asked.

A few other people in the crowd must have heard Bernard’s question and yelled similar questions of their own.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Jones, I’d be lying if I told you I knew what was going on,” Marc replied. “I’m in the dark as much as you, probably more. But I’m sure Mr. Ainsworth will explain the situation if you’ll give him a few more minutes to arrive.”

With that said, Marc forced his way past Bernard Jones and the other passengers and made his way behind the lobby desk. Now that

the nearby crowd realized he had no answers to give, most left him alone. Jones, however, had another question that did not pertain directly to the lobby meeting. He followed Marc toward the desk.

“You gathered everyone together here, so does that mean you have a list of all the guests currently at the motel?” Jones asked.

“I do,” Marc replied.

“Do you think I could see that list?” Jones asked.

“What for?”

“Does it really matter?” Jones asked. “Because it doesn’t have anything to do with you.”

“Mr. Ainsworth informed me that he does not want the passenger list to become public knowledge,” Marc responded.

“Public knowledge? This is for my private use,” Jones responded. “Besides, everyone in the motel is now gathered together in this room. Don’t you think I could just look around and figure out the passenger list?”

“My thoughts exactly, Mr. Jones,” Marc said. “Why do you need to see the list then?”

“Fine,” Jones said. “I want to know if a friend of mine has arrived yet. He was supposed to be here but I haven’t seen him. I want to know if he sneaked into the motel without me noticing.”

“I can not hand over the list, but if you give me a last name, I’ll see if I can help you,” Marc said.

“Fare, his last name is Fare,” Jones answered.

Marc already had the list of passengers memorized, but he did not ever recall reading the name Fare. Tyler just gave him an updated list and much to Marc’s surprise, there was a new name at the very bottom of the new list, just under JONES (4). It read: FARE (1).

“Mr. Fare is on the list, sir, but I do not believe he’s arrived yet,” Marc said.

“Do you know why not? Or when he’ll be showing up?” Jones asked.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Jones. Mr. Ainsworth has taken care of informing the passengers of the times to arrive at the motel,” Marc said. “You will have to ask him when he comes down.”

“When will that be?”

“As I said before, Mr. Ainsworth will be down shortly,” Marc said.

His suspicions confirmed that his CEO still hadn’t arrived, Bernard rejoined his family with more questions than answers.

“Bernard, I want to know what’s going on and I want to know now,” his wife demanded.

“Yeah, Daddy,” his daughter agreed.

*God I hope Tyler gets down here soon,* he thought.

It took less than two minutes for Jones’ wish to come true. The noise from the crowd increased when seeing Tyler Ainsworth emerge from the stairwell. As had been his dream from the moment he conceived the idea of building a seacraft, many of the country’s most prominent individuals had their eyes on Tyler, were waiting to hear what he had to say. He was the man of the hour, and because of what he’d accomplished in building his seacraft, every single person in this room owed his or her life to him.

All eyes followed Tyler’s every move. He made his way over to the lobby’s desk, where Marc waited. Tyler walked behind the desk but used a nearby chair as a stepping stool to climb atop the desk, where he greeted his people like he was their king. When he noticed the beautiful Hollywood actress Heather Sanders standing in the back of the room, Tyler had dreams that she’d show her appreciation toward him in a romantic way. After all, most of the men on the seacraft had their wives and family with them, making Tyler the only single man on the boat (not including those passengers selected by the government, though there would be little interaction between Tyler’s group on the luxurious upper level and the insignificant peons down below). Besides, Tyler would be the center of attention at all times on the craft, and since women loved power—

*Focus on what you have to do now,* Tyler told himself after several long seconds of gazing at Heather. The crowd became silent when he stood on top of the desk, no doubt waiting to hear him speak. *Besides, I’ll have plenty of time to make Heather mine.*

“For those who might have doubted me, President Andrew

Brighton officially announced today that Comet Clement, a comet large enough to cause an extinction level event, will be striking Earth in less than three months,” Tyler said, the crowd hanging on his every word. “First of all, let me assure you that the world will not be able to stop this comet from striking and the rest of humanity will not survive.”

At the mention of Tyler’s apocalyptic vision, a loud murmuring erupted throughout the crowd, many doubting the grim picture of the future that Tyler painted.

“I know this news might be difficult for some to swallow,” he continued once the noise died down, “but I speak the truth. I assure you, the government has known about this comet strike for more than ten years and their early attempts to deflect Clement have already been thwarted. As I’m sure many of you heard from the experts on television today, it is too late for the comet to be stopped, regardless of the president’s optimism. The government not only knows this, but they have known it for years, which was why they made their own plans to continue humanity by building the space station.”

Again, plenty of conversation spread through the lobby as Tyler’s passengers suddenly realized the government’s deception about the construction of the space outpost.

“For those who don’t know why you’re here today, I would like to start off by thanking your loved ones who did not share this comet secret. Nearly ten years ago, I learned from a high-ranking government official that this comet strike was inevitable. Using the resources from my company, I set out to design and build a massive underwater vehicle that could sustain human life in the safety of the deep oceans. After years of planning and construction—not to mention hundreds of millions of dollars required for such a venture—I completed my seacraft. I then went about assembling the finest group of individuals to offer spots on board, for I had the unique opportunity to save those people whom I felt were most worthy. I’m happy to say that those worthy individuals now stand in front of me.”

While many of the passengers clearly noticed the other wealthy and famous individuals before, everyone in the lobby now thought of

these people as those who'd help continue humankind.

"This news is shocking to many of you right now, but there is very little time to waste on worry or grief. We must all focus on making sure life goes on. The next few months on Earth will be crazy—very dangerous times—as society will figure out that there is no hope. Once this happens, lawlessness and chaos will take over and ravage our planet before Mother Nature finally finishes the job that human nature began. Fortunately for us, we will not be around to endure that. Parked a few hundred yards from shore is the seacraft that will be our home for a while, long enough so that when it's time to repopulate the world, we will be the first group to do so.

"We will board the seacraft tonight for the beginning of a long, difficult journey. Hopefully we will enjoy these hard times in the elegant surroundings I have provided. But before we take that first step together, I have arranged one final evening to remember our time spent on this planet. If you will follow my assistant Marc outside, we can begin the farewell party."

While many in the crowd continued to look confused, not a single person stayed behind as Marc led the group outside. On the large patio outside the motel, three dozen tables were set up, each of which had a brightly burning candle helping to provide light to the night. Two large speakers played soft dinner music, while the crew of the seacraft—including the five-star chef—began to serve hors d'oeuvre to the guests, some of whom mingled with one another as if they were at another black tie dinner.

Others such as Heather Sanders, were in no mood to party.

"Can you believe Ainsworth actually has the audacity to throw a party to celebrate the end of the world?" she asked Carollo and his wife. While Gaspare Carollo simply shrugged his shoulders, Mrs. Carollo clearly did not agree.

"Like the man said, there is no time for worry or grief, dear," she told Heather. "It is a very sad thing that many, many people will die, but *we* will continue life on this planet and we should be thankful for that."

While there were certainly others more concerned with those

not lucky enough to have spots on board, the large majority of the passengers put their cares behind them. Monica Walker even insisted that Jeremy dance with her, though her angry stares at Heather Sanders was proof that she was merely staking claim on her husband.

Tyler was glad to see most of his guests enjoy themselves for the few hours before the small transport boat would bring the guests to the seacraft. Bernard Jones tried to speak with him about one of the guests that hadn't yet arrived, but Tyler was in no mood to talk business at the moment. After assuring Bernard that his CEO would have plenty of opportunity to board the seacraft—after all, the boat still had to be available when the government's passengers arrived—Tyler popped the cork on an expensive bottle of champagne and began handing out glasses to those around him.

Tyler knew he would soon face more problems once his people were brought on board. Passengers would doubtlessly complain about their room assignments since it would be impossible to satisfy everyone. Plus, he was still concerned about how Admiral Walter Matthews would treat Tyler's people. But he took a long sip of champagne and decided to take his own advice; there was no time for worry and grief right now. Instead, he spotted Heather Sanders in the crowd and made his way toward her.

# CHAPTER SIX

“How can you face these people knowing what you know?” the former First Lady asked George Marshall, after he told her that President Brighton made his big announcement to the world. “Don’t you feel any guilt about continuing to lie to them?”

“Of course I feel guilty about it,” Marshall answered. “But that doesn’t mean there is a better way to handle this situation. When the time is right, once everyone is used to living aboard the station, I’ll inform them about their fate.”

“The fate that *you* have decided is right?” she asked. “You’re going to play God with these people the way you played God with my life for all of those years? Controlling what you thought I did and didn’t need to know?”

Marshall and his wife had not gotten along well since they started living on the space station. The former First Lady battled deep bouts of depression about the heavy burden of keeping such a secret. She made no secret about the anger she possessed as a direct result of the feelings she harbored for her husband. George always assumed he was doing what was best for her by keeping her out of the loop, avoiding his wife having to live with such a hardship. Apparently, he was wrong.

*I probably shouldn’t have told her at all, Marshall thought. I should’ve convinced her to come to the space station for other reasons, and then acted surprised when Andrew made the announcement.*

“Do you think I actually *like* playing God? Do you think I enjoy being in this position? People might figure out what I’ve done, that I tricked them to come aboard, but I’m in no rush for that to happen



just yet,” Marshall argued. “Truth is, I need to make sure that if a revolt happens aboard the station, you and I are protected and more importantly, that the station is protected. I have to make sure I complete that goal, regardless of what my heart tells me.”

Marshall’s wife began to cry—her usual reaction to stress these days—so he decided to leave her alone. Marshall left his pod and made his way toward the command center, where he would radio Earth for updates about the country following the announcement. It had been five hours since Brighton informed the world about Comet Clement, and Marshall wondered if pandemonium had broken out.

Marshall found the corridors of the space station surprisingly crowded as he made the lengthy journey from his room to the command center. Upon seeing so many people awake at this hour, Marshall had a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach at the thought of the passengers somehow finding out about the announcement. He had shut down the computer connection with Earth a few weeks earlier, but there was no telling how skillful some of these people were with computers and the Internet. Marshall did not have much knowledge of computers himself, but read about normal teenagers hacking into encrypted websites and networks. If kids could do something like that, there was no telling what some of the scientists aboard the station could do.

“Mr. President, what are you doing out and about at such a late hour?” one of the scientists asked.

“I could be asking you all the same question,” Marshall answered.

Although anxious to get to the communications system, Marshall opened the door for an explanation about some experiment or another. And if there was one thing he learned while living with these scientists, it was that they loved to talk about the projects they were working on. Unfortunately no explanation of such projects could be summarized in a minute or two; everything required a detailed description covering every major step of the scientific method.

“Mr. President, you’d never imagine the great success we’ve had in our most recent experiments,” one of the scientists said

excitedly as the others nodded their heads in agreement.

Marshall knew he was unlikely to follow exactly what this ‘great success’ would be, but he did not want to appear in a rush to get somewhere. Instead, he listened to the fifteen-minute account of the “positive effects of the germination time of squash in a zero-gravity environment.”

“We’ve consistently found a three-and-a-half percent increase in the time that...” *blah blah blah*.

It wasn’t that Marshall meant to be rude, but he hardly found reason to become excited by a change as slight as three-and-a-half percent. Still, Marshall pretended to listen, nodding his head when the scientists did, laughing when the group laughed and repeating any thoughts they seemed to stress.

“It sounds like major progress is being made,” Marshall lied, the scientists taking great pleasure in the compliment. “Keep up the good work.”

After excusing himself, Marshall continued on his way, but did not make it to the command center before being stopped by dozens more people. He heard at least ten more detailed accounts about a variety of different experiments. At least when Marshall spoke with some of the randomly selected passengers, he could actually talk about subjects that did not involve photosynthesis, stratification or embryonic dormancy in seeds. These regular people were focused on how ‘cool’ it was to float around, how ‘weird’ and laborious it was to do normal things and the way it was always cold aboard the space station.

By the time he finally approached the entrance to the command center, it was nearly an hour after he left his pod. When he floated by the final pod before entering the corner piece housing the communications section, Marshall saw Sergeant Blatchford, who nodded knowingly. It was reassuring to have at least one member of his new space station ‘Inner Circle.’ Despite his failure to recruit Wesley Maddox, Marshall knew he needed to add more help to his secret group before making the major announcement to the rest of the station’s passengers.

Marshall entered the command center corner piece, where the hallways were significantly narrower than those of the main corridors. This corner piece was the exact size as the three others, but everything felt more confined because of the large docking area. Smaller sections on the other corner pieces contained docking stations, but those were more for emergency use. The command center airlock and pressurization unit (ALPU) was designed to be the major welcoming center for the station, leaving the rest of this corner undersized.

Luckily, nobody passed through the hallways when Marshall arrived. He quickly took out his keycard, inserted it into the proper slot and gained access to the restricted command center. Accessible by only a handful of crewmembers, Marshall found that he was not alone in the room.

As usual, Lillian Edwards busily performed safety inspections of the numerous systems aboard the station, checking several computer monitors adorning the walls in the room. From this room, Lily monitored just about every system, including: pressure readouts from the 120 pods, which helped to ensure there were no leakages resulting from pod damage; oxygen and nitrogen level readings from each of the eight corridors connecting the four corner pieces, which assured the air remained breathable for those in every section of the station; and a distribution chart of the energy throughout the station, which made sure the solar panels on the exterior of the station were generating the correct levels of electricity needed to power all of the systems. Certain monitors even displayed images from a dozen hidden cameras, placed strategically throughout the station so a person in the command center would always have a general idea of the station's security.

A third person joined Marshall and Lily in the command center. The representative from the computer-networking firm hired to devise the computer systems on board was fiddling with some part of the network, whose mainframe was housed in this room. This was the one person on board who made Marshall most nervous, as he had the ability to fix the network and connect the station's computers to those on Earth. If he wanted, the man could have the Internet back up and

running in every room of every pod in the entire space station in the matter of a few minutes.

“President Marshall, how are you doing this evening?” the man asked.

“I told you, call me George,” Marshall said. Although he always explained that he was no longer the president, there was not a single person on the station that would call him by his first name.

“Okay, George,” the man said. “What’s up?”

“You tell me,” Marshall replied nervously, wondering if this guy had the capability of connecting his own computer to the Internet. If that was the case, he could’ve surfed the Web hours ago and discovered the news about Comet Clement. He leaned closer to the networker and lowered his voice so Lily could not hear their conversation from across the room. “The networking system still down?”

“As you asked, Mr. President,” the man whispered back. “I was just coming in to check that none of the systems are being placed in jeopardy since we’ve been offline for so long.”

“Everything is okay?” Marshall asked. “Everything can be switched back on without problems?”

The man nodded his head confidently, but his face still was still etched in puzzlement.

“Yeah, but I don’t understand why we’re doing this,” the man said. “Everyone knows I’m in charge of the network and they keep looking at me like I’m incompetent or something. Is it really necessary that we keep the networks off?”

“I need everyone completely acclimated to the idea of being cut off from Earth,” Marshall said. The excuse was not one of his best ones, but seemed to appease the computer guy nonetheless. “We spent billions of dollars on this space station, and I want to prove to everyone that it can be self-sustaining, that we don’t need to be in contact with Earth for things to run smoothly.”

“Then why haven’t you disconnected the communications systems?” the man asked.

“Because most of the passengers don’t know about that

system,” Marshall explained. “Cutting off the network is something that everyone knows about; it’s a perception thing when you think about it. Besides, everybody seems to be content even though the Internet isn’t working. It’s giving them free time to explore the space station and enjoy their surroundings.”

The computer networker shrugged.

“If you say so,” he said. “Okay, since Miss Edwards over there hasn’t given me the time of day, I guess I’ll take the hint.”

And with that, the computer worker left the command center, leaving Marshall alone with the beautiful safety inspector.

“He still hasn’t fixed the network, has he?” Lily asked.

It was rare that she spoke to Marshall, normally concentrating on her inspections. But the former president knew he now had a golden opportunity to do some recruiting.

“It’s not his fault,” Marshall answered. “One of the doo-hickeys got cooked or something—as you can probably tell, I’m not big into computer terminology. He has to wait for the next shuttle to arrive to get the parts needed to fix it. He tried finding ways around the problem, but hasn’t come up with anything yet.”

“If he concentrated as much on the network mainframe as he did on staring at me, there’s no doubt he would’ve come up with something by now,” Lily said. Marshall smiled, impressed with the young lady’s candor, certainly a quality he appreciated in those he wanted advice from. Lily mistook Marshall’s silent moment of thought for a need to be alone and began to float toward the exit. “I’m sorry, sir, you must need privacy.”

This was normally the case, but Marshall did not want to lose this opportunity to speak with Lily in private.

“Please stay for a few minutes,” Marshall said to Lillian’s surprise. “You’re the only person I see on a regular basis. I have to admit, I truly appreciate that you are the only one around here who seems to be interested in making sure the station runs smoothly at all times.”

“My presence here doesn’t change much since the computers are programmed to take care of any problems on their own,” Lily said,

showing the modesty that endeared her to many people.

“But you still like to take an active role in making sure every safety precaution is taken,” Marshall said. “Because of you, every single person on this space station is much safer.”

“Thank you, sir,” Lily said, her face turning a darker shade of red. “I was lucky enough to have this opportunity to work on the safety crew and I want to make sure nobody regrets giving me the chance.”

As opposed to his earlier talks with Wesley Maddox, Lily Edwards gave every correct response Marshall could have hoped for. The former president always liked her strong work ethic and the vast knowledge she had with the intricacies of the space station and its numerous systems. But now he began to understand why she worked so hard. He liked her answers enough to find out just how trustworthy Lily could be.

“You really like living aboard the station, don’t you?” Marshall asked.

“It was an honor to be selected as part of the construction crew to work here,” Lily said. “Don’t get me wrong, with all of the hard work and effort I put into training, I deserved to be selected. But it was a dream of mine to work in space ever since I was a little girl.” “And how do you think the ‘Inaugural Month’ is going so far?” Marshall asked, repeating the same questions he put forth to Maddox.

“Very well,” Lily answered. “I figured the scientists and doctors and military personnel would be no problem, but I’ve been pleasantly surprised by how well the normal people have adjusted to living in such an environment. This month should go a long way to prove to the world that normal people *can* live aboard.”

“What about you? How are you holding up after extending your stay in space?” Marshall asked.

“Perfectly, sir,” Lily answered. “To tell you the truth, I was afraid that once the station was built, I would be sent back to Earth and would never have the chance to return. Being asked to stay was one of the biggest thrills of my life. I only wish I had more than these next few weeks.”

“You seem to have a much different mindset toward this opportunity than Wesley Maddox does,” Marshall said.

Marshall could immediately tell from the expression on Lillian’s face that she knew what he meant. Still, Lily did not want to speak badly about the man who was such a good friend to her, who’d given her every chance to succeed. She was definitely disappointed that Wesley now showed a complete indifference toward his job as safety inspector, but she still did not want to say anything to sully his reputation.

“I’m sure Wesley has spent so many years designing and helping to build the space station that he needs a break from it all,” she said. “After all, he’s put his life on hold for over ten years to make sure it was built correctly. He was getting used to life back on the ground when he was asked to come back up here for another month. If I wasn’t so in love with the idea of living in space, I might have felt as anxious to get back to Earth, too.”

“Then I’m afraid that I made quite a blunder inviting him along,” Marshall said.

Lily could see that the former president was upset with himself about Maddox, but she could not imagine why he was getting so bent out of shape.

“I wouldn’t worry too much about it, sir,” Lily said. “Wesley handled everything fine so far, even if he’s been a bit cranky and uninterested in having face time with the other passengers. But he’ll be back on Earth in a couple weeks and then he can forget about this place.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure of that,” Marshall said, looking away from Lily for the first time since they started talking.

“What do you mean?” Lily asked. She suddenly had the feeling that there was something she wasn’t being told.

“You know how much I like you and the job you’ve done, Lily. So can I trust you with something important?” Marshall asked.

“Of course you can, sir,” Lily said.

“What would you think about living aboard the space station for *more* than the next few weeks?” Marshall asked. “Maybe staying

aboard long-term?”

“I would love to stay,” she said. “But what exactly do you mean by long-term?”

“I don’t know exactly,” Marshall said. “But I would guess at least the next five...maybe ten years.”



# CHAPTER SEVEN

The walk to John's house took Colin nearly two hours, even though it felt more like two days. It was nearly five miles to the next town over, but seemed much farther because of the high amount of stress on Colin's mind.

He spent a lot of the time searching the dark night sky for the comet, as if Clement would be easy to spot in the heavens. But as his head swiveled the entire 360 degrees to view the sky above, Colin realized he could be looking right at the comet and wouldn't even recognize it.

*I should've paid more attention in science class, he told himself. If only it hadn't been so boring...*

Unfortunately, comet searching did not have the soothing effect on his mind he hoped it would. While Colin was more than confident in his ability to protect himself physically, he saw footage from riots before and knew that physical strength was no match for crazies with guns.

It didn't take long for his mind to begin playing tricks on him. Even though he was sure nothing had really changed, the night still appeared darker than usual, the streetlights seemed like they were farther away from each other than he remembered. For every five steps he took under the streetlights' dim illumination, it seemed he took the next ten in near darkness. The unusual dark was not the only thing playing tricks on Colin's mind, either. Every noise he heard, no

matter how distant or insignificant, sounded more ominous than it should have.

By the time he ran to the Fare estate, Colin was sweating and breathing heavily while heading up the long winding driveway. Mr. Fare's Mercedes was gone. John's Mach One Mustang was also nowhere to be seen. Colin could not see any lights inside the house, leading to an immediate feeling of dread washing over his mind. The knot already in his stomach suddenly tightened. Colin's growing sense of paranoia became much greater, his mind conjuring up multiple stories—each as unlikely as the next—about where his friend could have gone.

*Upon hearing the news of Comet Clement, could Mr. Fare have returned from his secret destination and taken John with him? Colin wondered. Or could social services have discovered a minor was living alone in this house and taken John away? Or maybe the cops were on the hunt for Mr. Fare and took John into custody for questioning. John could've even freaked out about the comet, gotten into his car and driven off, though I'm sure he would've told me first...*

Colin forced his mind to relax. He rang the doorbell and waited nervously, trying to look inside the nearby window for any sign of movement. After a few minutes, he pushed the doorbell button again, but heard no noise inside the house. Fearing the doorbell was broken, he pounded on the door several times before waiting longer. Finally, Colin pounded on the front door for nearly five minutes, unleashing the frustrations that he might have to return home and face his father. The thought of taking that two-hour walk back home was maddening.

By the time his energy was sapped and both his hands were sore (especially his still-healing right hand), Colin turned around, put his back against the door and collapsed to the ground. The pressure and frustration of the night's events finally got the better of him. He found it increasingly difficult to suppress the tears welling behind his eyes. He forced himself to take slow, deep breaths to control his emotions. He needed to think clearly about what to do next. When he finally realized that sitting around was not doing any good, Colin reached up, grabbed the doorknob and pulled himself up, but not

before he felt some leeway from the door's handle.

"No," Colin said aloud, looking down at the knob. "It couldn't be this easy."

When he tried the doorknob, Colin found the front door unlocked, unsure whether that was a good sign. He could not imagine why John would leave and not lock the door, unless he fled the house with no intention of returning. But with how dangerous the world became over the last six hours, it also seemed asinine to think that John was at home with the door unlocked.

Colin slowly opened the door to find the large foyer completely dark. He froze before even considering going into the house. Turning around and going back home was not an option now so Colin worked up the courage to enter the mansion, despite whatever might be lurking in the darkness.

"Hello?" he called, hearing the sound of his voice echo off the marble floors. In case he had to make a sudden exit, Colin left the front door open and took a few more steps inside the huge house. "Hello?"

After crossing the foyer, Colin was met with a faint whiff of smoke, but not of the variety produced by a fire. He also heard the faint sound of professional voices—familiar voices he'd heard earlier at his own house. Growing more confident that nothing nefarious was going on, Colin walked toward the large living room, the smell of marijuana smoke growing increasingly stronger as the voices of TV reporters grew louder. He found John sitting on the huge leather couch, a cloud of smoke hanging hazily above the dimly lit room, his eyes glued to the television. John barely flinched at the appearance of another person, but his face lit up when recognizing his best friend standing before him.

"Dude, it's the end of the world, man," John said, his voice strangely composed, without a single hint of fear.

"Didn't you hear me knocking?" Colin asked, annoyed that his friend's refusal to answer the door caused a gamut of negative thoughts to run through his mind.

John did not offer an excuse. He simply shrugged his shoulders

and took another drag from the joint he held. Colin always assumed that John's insistence to rebel against authority had led him to first smoking cigarettes and now pot, but he hardly thought his intelligent friend was some sort of drug fiend.

"Don't you call before you show up?" John fired back, not without giggling. Even in his drug induced daze, John was still quicker-witted than Colin would ever be.

"I tried calling like a hundred times, but—you know what, nevermind," Colin answered, taking a seat on the lounge chair instead of arguing with John. "Are they saying anything new about the comet?"

"Not really," John answered. "They're still saying the world is pretty much screwed."

"Did they say there was any way to stop the comet?" Colin asked.

"Who knows, man, I don't think they know how to deal with a comet," John said. "They've been talking about sending a nuclear bomb to blow it up, but they don't think that would be strong enough to get the job done. They think a nuke might just break the comet into smaller pieces, which would pelt the Earth anyway and cause just as much damage as one big comet."

"So then what other choice—"

"Hold on a second, I love this part," John interrupted, pointing to the television. On TV, they were replaying the computer-animated view from space of the comet striking Earth, the huge wave of fire quickly spreading across the planet. "Dude, that is going to be a crazy sight."

Crazy was not the word Colin would use, more like terrifying or horrible. Trying to avoid the slow-motion replay of the animation, Colin glanced down at the coffee table where he saw a large manila envelope that was covered in tape. The top of it had been torn off.

"What's that?" Colin asked, pointing to it.

For the first time since Colin arrived, the cloudiness in John's eyes seemed to clear for a moment when he looked at the envelope.

"Just a note from my dad," John said nonchalantly.

“What did it say?”

“Not much, just that he’s not coming back,” he said. “Just as I thought.”

“Did he say where he went or why he left?” Colin asked, wondering why John hadn’t mentioned the letter sooner. His father’s whereabouts were a mystery the two had talked about constantly over the last few weeks.

“I don’t feel like talking about that right now,” John said. “He’s gone, that’s all that matters.”

“Well, your dad left you and I finally left my dad,” Colin said, trying to change the subject. “We just had a big fight and I left, told him I was never coming back.”

“It’s about time, man,” John said, instantly cheering up. “You should’ve done that a long time ago. You always could’ve stayed here.”

“You should have suggested that before,” Colin said. John offered him the joint, but as usual, Colin turned it down. “So it’s okay if I crash here for awhile?”

“Sure, but if we’re still around after the next three months, you’ll have to start paying rent.”

# CHAPTER EIGHT

**JUNE 1, 2020**

**TWO MONTHS, TWENTY-SEVEN DAYS UNTIL IMPACT...**

Tyler's big sendoff party ended a few hours before the sun came up. Although many of his guests were exhausted, every single passenger remained excited by the sight of the seacraft parked just a few hundred yards from shore. Most of these high-society people mingled and made small talk amongst themselves, but the idea of boarding the seacraft was on everyone's mind and the main topic of conversations. By the time Tyler announced that the first group of passengers would be transported to the seacraft, nearly every one of the hundred guests rushed him at once, yelling demands that they should be first to go.

"I'm sorry," Tyler said once the noise died down. "But the first group has already been determined to board the seacraft. When I read your names, please come forward."

Before Tyler read from the first list, many of the passengers voiced their dislike about how things were being handled. The calm party atmosphere suddenly gave way to hostility, especially since these people were not used to being denied what they wanted.

"That's not fair. We all paid the same amount of money for our rooms. Why should some people get first choice over others?" asked Roy Hopkins, owner of multiple professional sports teams.

Numerous passengers in the crowd called out their agreement.

“Nobody is receiving first choice over anybody else,” Tyler answered, quieting the malcontents. “Rooms have already been randomly assigned to people. But have no fear, I assure you that every room is of equal size and brilliance.”

The promise seemed to appease some, at least the loud ones making the most noise. As Tyler read the names of those selected to go first, he saw disappointed expressions on those not chosen.

“...and finally, Bernard Jones and family,” Tyler said, calling out the final name on the list of the first group. Because Jones found a buyer for the final spot on the seacraft—a \$5 million seat paid for by the only passenger not to show up yet—Tyler owed the computer software mogul a favor, which was now repaid.

The first group was sent back into the motel to retrieve their belongings. They were accompanied by Tyler, Marc and Nigel Huffington, who remained out of sight during most of the celebration. These three men helped carry luggage. Once the ten passengers and three ‘bellhops’ (as Jones had jokingly referred to Tyler, Marc and Nigel) were crammed aboard the small motor boat, the other passengers watched enviously as Marc piloted the boat over calm ocean waters. Tyler radioed ahead to Admiral Walter Matthews, the seacraft’s captain, who sent one of his men to open the large entrance hatch.

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Upon entering the seacraft and descending to the luxurious lobby, Tyler watched with great pleasure as his guests stared in awe at their incredible surroundings. None could have imagined the sheer size of the seacraft’s interior. Even Tyler still admired the boat’s awesome size every time he stepped foot inside of her.

The group was even more impressed when they discovered more than one hallway connecting to the lobby that led to the staterooms. Marc escorted Jeremy Walker and his family down one of the corridors, while Nigel led a wealthy Senator from Nevada down yet another hallway.

“And that leaves you and your family with me, Mr. Jones,” Tyler said formally. “If you follow me, I will show you to your rooms.”

Tyler continued to play tour guide to the Jones family, pointing out different features of the hallway furniture and the classic art that adorned the walls. Although the two children took very little interest in what Tyler was showing them, Mrs. Jones seemed fascinated with the tiny intricacies Tyler troubled himself to include on the opulent upper level. It wasn't until Tyler showed them the small movie theater that the kids showed any excitement. As they made their way toward the end of the corridor, Tyler explained that this was the same hallway where his own room was located.

“Does that mean these rooms are the best on the ship?” Mrs. Jones asked.

“First of all, ma'am, I must point out something the builders of this craft reminded me about constantly,” Tyler said. “A vessel that floats on the water's surface is referred to as a ship. One that travels under the surface is referred to as a boat. But to answer your question, Mrs. Jones, every room is of equal size and brilliance.”

An expression of disappointment showed up on the beautiful woman's face, not to mention a look of anger on Bernard's. But when the couple looked at him, Tyler gave them both a guilty wink.

“I will never admit to the others that one room is the best,” Tyler said, “but I always keep my end of a deal, Mr. Jones.”

Tyler opened the door to one of the final rooms, the one shared by the Jones children. Bernard and his wife took a quick peek into the wonderful room, but Mrs. Jones was much more interested in seeing the next room.

“But Daddy, what about the rest of my luggage?” the teenage daughter asked in a whiny voice.

“My men will retrieve it from the transport boat and bring it to your room soon,” Tyler said, being much nicer to the little brat than he would've had her parents not stood right there.

In fact, the entire Jones family brought much more luggage than the other guests. But with the deal Bernard made to procure a larger room, he allowed his family to pack as much stuff as they



needed – as if he even had the choice to keep his wife and daughter to one suitcase apiece. The girl looked at Tyler as if he was a pauper, no doubt an expression she learned from her mother.

“You two stay here now,” mother said to her children. “Unpack what you’ve carried with you and get yourselves familiar with your new room.”

“I don’t want to share a room with her,” the little boy said. “All she ever talks about is clothes, boys and her hair. *And* she smells bad.”

“At least I don’t wet the bed,” the daughter shot back.

“Mom,” the boy whined, his face turning a deep shade of red. “Tell her to stop lying.”

“That’s enough from both of you,” Bernard finally said sternly.

Tyler could already tell that housing the Jones family next door to him might not have been the smartest idea, especially if they constantly fought and bickered like this. Tyler took Mr. and Mrs. Jones to their room next, the one that used to be occupied by Nigel Huffington. Besides Tyler’s room, this was the second largest room aboard the entire boat. Nigel had been disappointed to lose it, but Tyler explained to him that they had to make sacrifices to make things work.

“My God,” Mrs. Jones said when Tyler opened the door and moved aside. “This room is breathtaking.”

And indeed it was. Although the walls were made out of metal, it would be hard to tell the difference between this room and the bedroom of any millionaire with exquisite taste. Expensive Persian rugs covered most of the floor, while the bedroom furniture was made of darkly colored wood. An old fashioned bookcase stocked with dozens of first-edition works of modern literature lined the far wall. The furnishings of this room cost more than a lot of the rooms combined, but Tyler spared no expense to make sure Bernard Jones was properly accommodated.

“Even my own room is not as opulent as this one,” Tyler said truthfully, though he did not mention how he had little interest in fancy furniture. Still, when Bernard saw the expression on his wife’s face, he extended his hand to Tyler with an immense sense of

gratitude.

“You are truly a great man,” Bernard said, saying the six words Tyler hoped to hear from everyone on board. “Now if you could just make sure my CEO has access to the ship when he arrives, I see no reason why I’ll ever need another favor.”

“As long as he arrives before we set sail, your man will be able to come on board,” Tyler said. “Now I must get back to the party so we can continue transporting guests. Please, feel free to either begin moving in or venturing around the rest of the boat.”

“You mean there’s more to your seacraft than these hallways and the lobby?” Mrs. Jones asked.

“There are plenty of amenities in the upper level that you’ll eventually discover,” Tyler said.

“Upper level?” Mrs. Jones asked. “Am I correct in assuming there’s also a lower level then?”

“You don’t let anything get by you, Mrs. Jones,” Tyler complimented, much to the lady’s delight. “There is, in fact, a whole other level of rooms below us, but they are going to be for our... *other* passengers.”

Mrs. Jones face lit up at the mention of more people.

“I didn’t know there would be more people than those we saw at the motel,” she said. “That is wonderful news. I hope I know some of them.”

“I would be surprised if you knew anybody from this second group,” Tyler said.

“I know quite a bit of the country’s rich and famous.”

“I’m afraid the occupants on the lower level will not match the...how can I put this delicately?...the high caliber of guest I have assembled for the upper level,” Tyler said. “And besides, the bottom level rooms are very tiny and plain, hardly fit for a prisoner.”

“Oh, dear,” Mrs. Jones said. “Why on Earth would you allow such paltry people the chance to survive this comet?”

“I’m sorry, ma’am, but that requires a much longer explanation than I have time to provide,” Tyler said. “I promise you I will explain the situation to you another time. Just keep in mind that these people

will have absolutely no effect on the quality of your stay on board my seacraft. Now if you'll excuse me, I have other guests waiting."

# CHAPTER NINE

After lugging all of the Jones family luggage off the small motor boat, Tyler Ainsworth headed back to shore to pick up more passengers, leaving Marc and Nigel behind to finish carrying the remaining suitcases. Neither man was very large, yet Nigel could somehow carry twice the amount of weight as Tyler's fragile assistant. Deciding not to overexert themselves, Nigel and Marc only took two suitcases each before making their way down one of the corridors.

"I don't remember signing up for this," Nigel Huffington complained, still unhappy about the public job Tyler assigned him.

Nigel had been miserable ever since Marc came to his motel room two hours earlier and said it was time to help move passengers to the seacraft. Worse, Tyler informed him during the first boat ride that Nigel's things were moved out of his room aboard the seacraft, the same room Nigel lived in for years while construction of the boat happened around him. And now, in a final insulting move, Tyler ordered Nigel to carry all of this luggage for the new tenants in his former room.

"We obviously can't hire anybody to come aboard and do it," Marc said.

"And these people can't move their own stuff?" Nigel asked.

Marc merely shrugged his shoulders, obviously not as upset as his counterpart.

"They paid Tyler very good money to come on board," Marc rationalized. "I'm not sure if you recognize these people, but they aren't used to carrying their own bags *anywhere* they go."

Marc took commands from Tyler for years and did not hesitate

to follow orders his boss gave him. Nigel thought this was strange, especially since Marc knew Tyler's treachery about selling his seat on board the seacraft. Much to Nigel's surprise, Tyler's assistant remained with the seacraft, remained taking orders from the man who all but condemned him to death.

And now, Marc made excuses why he must listen to Tyler's order to carry suitcases for the snobs rich enough to save their own lives. Marc even wore a bit of a smile on his face and Nigel just *had* to know what the man was thinking.

"I assume you watched everything on TV about the comet?" Nigel asked sarcastically, knowing full well that Marc watched the announcement in Tyler's room. "I guess you finally believe me about Comet Clement?"

"I'd be lying if I said I never doubted you, but I believed you for the most part," Marc answered. "Looking back on everything, I can't believe I was so naïve to think this craft was strictly a tourist attraction."

"You believed what I told you, but you're still here, serving Tyler Ainsworth after what he's done to you?" Nigel asked incredulously.

"He hasn't done anything to me just yet," Marc answered. "As a matter of fact, there's been no indication that Tyler will kick me off the craft, especially now that his passengers have arrived. If he was going to get rid of me, he would have done so already."

As they walked down the elaborately decorated hallway, Marc and Nigel saw what the interior of the seacraft would be like from now on. Standing just outside one of the rooms was a young boy and a teenage girl, both of whom looked up and down the hallway. The kids looked interested in doing further exploration, but neither left the vicinity of their room. As Marc and Nigel approached Nigel's old room, Mr. and Mrs. Jones emerged into the hallway.

"Mom, we want to look around before everyone else gets here," the young boy said. "Can we go please?"

"Just wait and your father and I will come with you," Mrs. Jones said, apparently news to Bernard who simply rolled his eyes.

Mrs. Jones turned to the men carrying her luggage. “Where’s the rest of the suitcases?”

“Still back in the lobby, ma’am,” Marc said. “We needed more than one trip to bring everything.”

Mrs. Jones did not appear pleased by this, but simply pointed to the corner of the room where the other suitcases waited.

“I trust I don’t have to worry about thievery if I leave the room unlocked while we look around?” she asked.

“Ma’am, the boat is mostly empty at the moment,” Marc explained. “Besides, I don’t think you’ll have to worry about any of Tyler’s passengers being thieves.”

“I wouldn’t be too sure of that,” Mrs. Jones said. “You obviously don’t know how some wealthy people can be. When you bring the rest of our bags, please be sure to close the door behind you.”

With that, Mr. and Mrs. Jones joined their two children and walked down the hallway. Nigel immediately disliked the pompous woman—making him even more jealous that she now had his room—but Marc followed her orders and carefully arranged the suitcases in the corner of the room. Nigel, on the other hand, tossed his two bags toward the others, knocking a few over. He took this opportunity to continue the conversation with Marc.

“You don’t think Tyler is going to get you off this ship somehow?” Nigel asked.

“I don’t see why he would,” Marc answered. “He’s been much nicer to me recently; I think he’s beginning to understand the contributions I’ve made to get this seacraft completed. If he was going to get rid of me, I think he would’ve told me before he started moving everyone on board. Besides, the one person he was going to replace me with hasn’t shown up anyway. I would have thought that...”

Marc had a way of blabbering once he started talking about something. Nigel started to ignore Marc when he thought he heard footsteps just outside the room. Footsteps in the corridors had a way of reverberating off the walls.

“Did you hear that?” Nigel asked once Marc stopped talking.

“Did I hear what?”

“Footsteps,” Nigel answered. “I thought I heard someone coming.”

“Of course you’re hearing footsteps,” Marc said. “There are people actually on board now. You’ll have to get used to that and stop being so paranoid all the time.”

Nigel heard the sound of footsteps come to a stop. Though the sound still made him nervous, he tried to remain concentrated on the conversation with Marc.

“If I was in your position, I wouldn’t feel as comfortable as you do about how Tyler is treating you,” Nigel warned. “Once Tyler gets an idea into his head, he usually sticks with it. I’m warning you to remain cautious.”

Again, Nigel heard the sound of footsteps and tried to ignore them—at least this time, they seemed to be growing fainter.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Marc said. “But I still think Tyler and I have reached an unspoken understanding. He needs me here and I don’t see how he could find somebody loyal to him like I’ve been. Now come on, we have to get the rest of the luggage before Tyler gets back with the second group of passengers.”

“Are you sure those footsteps didn’t seem extra loud?” Nigel asked.

Marc smiled and shook his head.

“You *are* really paranoid,” he said as they walked out the room.

“Just remember not to lose that envelope I gave you,” Nigel said.

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When Bernard Jones rejoined his family a few minutes later in the lobby, his wife did not look happy to see him back so soon. The kids continued to explore the lobby area but Bernard’s wife quickly approached him with an expression on her face that he *knew* meant bad news for him.

“What are you doing back here?” she snapped, trying to keep

her voice down so the kids couldn't hear. "I told you to go back to the room and make sure they aren't going through our stuff."

Bernard had plenty of other things on his mind than worrying if a couple of 'bellhops' were looking through his clothes. Though he just learned how disloyal Marc and Nigel were to their boss, he didn't care if they were alone with his stuff. After overhearing what the two men were talking about, Bernard knew he now faced a difficult decision. Though it was none of Bernard's business, the computer mogul definitely thought Tyler would be interested to hear what his two most trusted confidantes were saying in his absence. And Bernard hadn't gotten as far as he did in the business world without learning the importance of forging tight relationships with people that mattered most. If he had to sell out a few strangers along the way to get in good with Tyler, then that's what he would do.

"Are you listening to me?" Bernard's wife complained, snapping him out of his deep thought. "They could be going through my stuff right now, looking at my panties or something."

"Look, these people work for Tyler. We have to learn to trust them, like we'll have to learn to trust everyone else," Bernard said.

"But I don't want them—"

Bernard interrupted his wife before she could say anything else. He pointed toward the hall, where Nigel and Marc emerged into the lobby. Bernard simply watched the two men, wondering if Tyler knew the kind of people he had working for him.

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When Nigel and Marc entered the lobby to get the rest of the luggage, they saw the Jones family exploring the large room. Nigel saw the two kids entertaining themselves and the wife appeared to be lost in her surroundings. But there was something about Bernard Jones that Nigel did not like. The computer mogul stared at Nigel, who could not help but feel Bernard's eyes following him.

He also could not help but feel very nervous about the man.



# CHAPTER TEN

Telling Lillian Edwards about Comet Clement was the perfect way for George Marshall to practice telling the rest of the passengers. Like everyone else told about the deadly comet, Lily's immediate reaction was one of doubt, as she went so far as to accuse the former president of playing a joke on her. But it didn't take long to be convinced that what he told her was unfortunately true.

"That's why everyone was brought on board for the 'Inaugural Month'," Lily quickly figured out. "These people were specifically chosen because they have the best chance of surviving in this harsh environment for a long period of time. You never expected any of these passengers to return to Earth."

"It wasn't the most honest way of getting people here, but it's what needed to be done," Marshall explained to her. "Do you think everyone else will realize this was my plan all along?"

"You think everyone would assume that being aboard the station was just a matter of coincidence?" Lily asked incredulously.

"I was hoping..."

Lily shook her head.

"I don't think so, sir," she told Marshall. "These people are way too intelligent not to put two and two together." Lily was quiet for a moment, lost in thought. "Let's just hope they're thankful that the space station was built in the first place..."

Having a sudden epiphany, Lily passed from denial into anger, as the acrimonious gaze she gave Marshall made him wonder if telling her was such a good idea.

"How long have you known about the comet?" she asked.

“Like I told you, for the last six months,” Marshall said, sticking with the story he originally told her. “We had to get the station finished and get strong people up here before the rest of the world fell into chaos.”

The look of anger on Lily’s face was now mixed with disbelief. It was the first time Marshall could ever remember seeing the girl not look beautiful.

“Why was the space station built in the first place?” she asked next.

Although Marshall had an idea where Lily was going with such questions, he still pretended to be confused, to continue his lie.

“We wanted to prove to the world that America was the most technologically savvy country on Earth,” Marshall told her, the same answer given hundreds of times to reporters over the years. From the look he continued to receive from her, he could tell she was no mindless reporter looking for a sound bite. “We had the opportunity to build an improved version of the *ISS* and *Mir*. We had every reason to improve the groundwork of our earlier space forefathers.”

“Mr. President, you came to me for help, did you not?” she asked.

“I came to you because I want to make sure a high level of safety is maintained on the station once we have a lot of unhappy campers,” Marshall said.

“And this announcement will come soon?” Lily asked.

“*Very soon*,” Marshall responded, leaving out how his own cowardice was the reason he was still stalling.

“So you’re going to need *my* help to maintain safety?” she asked.

“Yes,” Marshall finally answered.

“Then I want the truth,” Lily demanded. Marshall was surprised to see this nice, quiet girl transform. “I want to know when you first found out about the comet and why the space station was *really* built.”

For the next hour, Marshall proceeded to explain every detail of what happened over the last dozen years, finding it oddly comforting to divulge the secrets he never thought he’d tell anyone. By the time

he finished, Marshall felt a weight lifted from his shoulders. For the most part, Lily was understanding of every decision the ‘Inner Circle’ made, even if she didn’t agree with everything Marshall, Armour and Mansfield had done.

Once Lily finally heard the entire truth, she allowed herself a moment to tear up when realizing the effects this situation would have on her personally. Although she didn’t have any close friends on Earth and most of her family was not close, Lily always had a good relationship with her parents, even if they hadn’t agreed with her choice to enter the space program. Thinking of the chaotic world her mother and father would have to endure during the final months before the comet strike—not to mention what they would face on August 22—Lily had trouble containing her emotions or tears.

When she finally controlled herself, Marshall was glad he decided to include her in his new ‘Inner Circle.’ Despite the plethora of emotions running through her mind, Marshall was impressed that Lily pulled herself together enough to speak logically about the upcoming situation aboard the station. By the time the two ended their conversation and Lily left Marshall alone in the command center, he felt that waiting to tell the other passengers about the comet—waiting until he got his new core group together—was his best choice.

Unfortunately, that good feeling lasted less than twenty-four hours. The next day, the former president began to realize how many other people *besides* Wesley Maddox were looking forward to returning to Earth.

“Mr. Marshall, you have no idea how significant these findings are,” one of the scientists told him following a lengthy description concerning some sort of experiment. “I can’t wait to return to Earth to publish my findings. This is going to make me a rock star in the world of botany.”

Marshall wasn’t sure whether that was a good thing or not, but one message came through to him loud and clear: there were many people on board already making plans on what they’d do upon returning to Earth.

“Don’t you have more experiments that can be conducted in

this sort of environment?" Marshall asked.

"Sure, sir, there will always be plenty of tests done in space, which is why this space station is so wonderful," the scientist told him. "But there is little left that I have to accomplish here. I'm looking forward to getting back to Earth so I can run the same tests in an environment with gravity. At that time, I can draw the proper conclusions, write up my report and publish it in the *Journal of Botany Studies* for the rest of the world's botanists to examine."

Marshall originally hoped that the scientists would be most understanding about a lengthy stay aboard the space station, that they would view the next few years as an opportunity to do long-range studies to help the transition to living on a scorched Earth easier for the rest of the passengers.

But as the moment of his own announcement drew near, Marshall began to question more and more who would be most upset at the thought of living aboard the station for years to come. Making matters worse, the former president also noticed that many 'normals' seemed to grow tired of being in space, their initial thrill for zero-gravity atmosphere now wearing off.

The only group that seemed content on board was the military crew. Since telling Sergeant Blatchford about the comet, Marshall had not heard a single mention from any Marine about returning to Earth. Marshall was certain that the sergeant had not informed his men and women about the specifics of the comet, but he figured Blatchford informed them that they would not be returning to Earth as regularly scheduled. At least the military crew's contentment was a positive for Marshall. Having this group on his side was most important anyway.

Regardless of potential displeasure from everyone else on board, Marshall knew one thing: the longer he put off making the announcement, the worse the situation would be.

# CHAPTER

# ELEVEN

It was just after ten o'clock in the morning when the last of the exhausted passengers arrived aboard Tyler's seacraft. After hours of physical labor, Marc and Nigel retired to their respective rooms. Marc's room was very nice, located in the same corridor as Tyler's. Tyler would never admit to his guests that the rooms in this hallway were the most luxurious on the entire boat. Knowing this about the rooms, Marc felt even safer about his status on board; his boss obviously placed him in that room for a reason. With his mind at ease, Marc collapsed onto the comfortable bed and quickly fell asleep.

Nigel, on the other hand, had plenty of reasons to be dissatisfied upon seeing his new room. He had only learned the day before that his old room was being taken away from him and given to one of Tyler's wealthiest passengers. Nigel nearly flew into a rage when he got the first glimpse of his new room. He could barely consider the small amount of space inside those four walls to be an actual room, as it closely resembled an oversized closet. The few belongings he had on board were strewn about on the floor, covering nearly every inch of the room. The bed took up almost half the space and there was not a single amenity that other rooms contained. A single hanging bulb provided light, though Nigel would have appreciated his surroundings more had he not been able to see.

It did not take long for Nigel to reach a conclusion about the cause for his punishment: Marc betrayed him by turning him in to

Tyler. *Or had it been a test all along?* Nigel wondered. *Did Tyler ever really plan on getting rid of Marc or did he just tell me that to see if I would betray his confidence?* Tyler always made it known that loyalty was important to him, so Nigel wondered whether he failed that test of devotion. Marc didn't seem worried about the threat of being booted off the craft, which meant he probably knew something that Nigel did not.

Nigel now worried if *he* would be the one kicked off the boat, especially since Comet Clement was no longer a secret and Tyler no longer had a use for him. He could only hope Marc didn't open the envelope he'd given him. Nigel realized there was nothing he could do now but wait and see what happened. Besides, he had too many other concerns at the moment, like where Tyler placed the bugs in this room to spy on him...

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While the majority of other passengers were asleep after being awake for the previous twenty-four hours, there was one man whose mind was turning too quickly for rest: Bernard Jones. The man who secured the second best room on the boat was not even enjoying his accommodations, despite the fact that his eyes could barely stay open. When there was an important decision that had to be made, sleeping was for fools who wanted to finish last. He'd gone days without sleep when in the middle of corporate takeovers. And if Bernard wanted to elevate his status on board the seacraft, he would have to get down to business right now.

Bernard paced the hallways of the boat for nearly an hour. Walking always helped stimulate his thought process. He made his decision to tell Tyler what he overheard between the two 'bellhops' earlier. While considering his options Bernard hadn't paid attention to any of his surroundings: he was lost. Upon noticing a small stairway, Bernard's curiosity overtook his desire to find the corridor that contained Tyler's room. There was a small, yellow sign on the door leading to a stairwell, which warned that these stairs led to the

LOWER LEVEL. Earlier, Tyler warned Bernard and his family about the people who'd one day inhabit the rooms down below, the 'common folks' chosen by the government. Tyler assured Jones that these individuals would be kept to their part of the boat, that it would be unwise for the 'better guests' to wander down a level. But since Bernard knew the lower level was still empty, he figured it would be safe to check it out.

There were more steps in the stairway than Bernard expected. When he finally reached the bottom and opened the door, he was surprised to see how confined everything felt. He expected the area to be much larger considering the depth to which the level dropped. The lower level hallway was the exact opposite of the upper level corridors. While the hallways upstairs were wide enough for numerous people to walk through with plenty of space, the lower halls were so narrow that two people couldn't possibly pass one another without a collision. And while the upper corridors had good lighting, high-quality carpeting, antique furniture and expensive art adorning the walls, the lower corridors were bare of everything. Bernard could hardly see five feet in front of him and his footsteps echoed against the metal walls with every step. The cold ambiance of the area felt straight out of a horror movie.

Bernard Jones was not a man to frighten easily, but being alone on this level gave him the creeps. Although the sense of dread in his mind begged him to return to the upper level, he ignored his own internal warning, as if to prove a point to himself that becoming afraid was childish. Upon coming to the first open door, Bernard peeked inside and instantly pitied those who would stay in these rooms. Not even a quarter of the size of his own room, this metal cell had two sets of bunk beds, one against each side wall, leaving barely enough room to enter the enclosed chamber. Four people would have to be stuffed in here like sardines, hardly a pleasant thought, for anyone suffering from claustrophobia.

*I guess it's better than living above the surface once the comet strikes*, Bernard thought, though if forced to choose between living in this room or death, he would likely choose the latter.

“What are you doing down here?” asked a man’s voice. It was so unexpectedly close that Bernard felt his heart nearly jump out of his chest. If the surprise of another presence startled him, the unexpected visitor’s huge appearance downright frightened him. Standing well over six feet tall—so tall that Bernard wondered if the man constantly hit his head on the ceiling—and built like an action movie star, the man stared at Bernard with a look that made the computer mogul feel like an insect about to be squashed.

It didn’t help that this huge man also held a large firearm.

“I’m sorry, I got lost upstairs and must have wandered down here by mistake,” Bernard said, unable to take his eyes from the gun. “I’m sorry, I didn’t know anybody was down here.”

The large man chuckled and holstered the gun in the waist of his pants. He suddenly seemed less scary than before. Bernard noticed that his large companion actually spoke with a feminine, high-pitched voice, which certainly did not match the rest of his appearance.

“No need to apologize, sir,” the large man said. “I was just doing weapons inspections when I heard footsteps. Thought I’d come and check out the noise. If you’ll hold on a moment, I’ll show you back to the stairwell. I know it’s easy to get turned around on the boat.” The large man stared at Bernard for an extra long moment, long enough to make him feel uncomfortable. “Hey, you’re that rich computer guy, right?”

Bernard followed the large man, who first stopped at a door, the only one aboard the boat that Bernard noticed had a lock. The man took out a set of keys and opened the closet, revealing a rather sizable cache of weapons. He took the gun from his pants, placed it in an open slot and closed the door, re-locking it when he was done. It made Bernard nervous to know that such weapons were on board—he’d never even considered the thought—though it made total sense.

The large man was unexpectedly friendly. He and Bernard struck up a conversation during their walk through the maze of corridors leading back to the stairwell. The man worked for Admiral Walter Matthews, the seacraft’s captain, a man whom Tyler had described as a ‘necessary evil’ aboard the boat. Of course Bernard did



not mention this to the larger man, especially since the admiral was a person the large man obviously respected. A Navy man of six years—most of that time spent aboard submarines—the large man explained that he did not mind living in the close quarters of the bottom floor, as that was how he'd lived so many years of his life.

"I suppose you couldn't show me to Tyler Ainsworth's room, could you?" Bernard asked once they reached the stairs.

"I'm sorry, sir, but the admiral has instructed us not to leave the bottom level until we are to report to duty," the large man said. "The admiral and my two colleagues are presently in the command center of the craft, which leaves me responsible for down here. Abandoning my post would be breaking a direct order."

"That's okay, I'm sure I'll be able to find it," Bernard said. "Thanks for your help finding the stairs. I'm sure I'll see you around."

After returning to the comfort of the upper level, Bernard continued to wander around, his mind now moving in other directions. He remembered Tyler mentioning an admiral and other seamen on board, but that thought had left his mind as quickly as it had entered. But seeing this large man on the bottom floor – seeing the large reserve of weaponry available to them – Bernard wondered if Tyler had as much control over the boat as he claimed. After all, true power on board lay with whoever controlled those guns, and that man was apparently this mysteriously absent Admiral Matthews.

Still, Bernard looked forward to meeting the admiral and hopefully gaining the man's confidence.

Without even realizing it, Bernard had meandered back to his own room, right next door to Tyler's. Having had plenty of time to think, he decided to still gain every ounce of trust that he could possibly muster from Tyler. He knocked lightly on Tyler's door, which opened a few moments later.

"Is everything okay, Bernard?" Tyler asked, using the same fake friendly voice as when the entire Jones family was around.

"You can cut the act, everyone else is asleep," Bernard said.

Tyler had trouble stifling a yawn of his own, his droopy eyes and frazzled hair clear signs that he'd been sleeping, too.

“If this isn’t important, I should get back to sleep,” Tyler said.

“Believe me, what I have to tell you is very important,” Bernard said. “May I come in?”

Tyler stepped aside and allowed Bernard to enter. Bernard quickly realized that Tyler was lying when he said the Jones’ room was even nicer than his.

“What’s going on?” Tyler said, hardly able to hide a bit of annoyance in his fatigued voice.

“How well do you trust the two guys who carried our suitcases aboard?” Bernard asked.

Any cobwebs that might have been in Tyler’s tired mind were suddenly gone, as he wondered exactly what Bernard knew about Marc or Nigel.

# CHAPTER TWELVE

The twelve hours following President Brighton's announcement were like a whirlwind for Emily Peterson, her normally boring life taking a sudden turn. Despite the fact that a comet was coming to eradicate everyone she'd ever known, Emily could never remember her life being so exciting. This excitement also brought on a feeling of guilt, as she knew her mind should be filled with sadness about the comet. But it was about time *she* was the one to avoid tragedy and have something positive happen for once.

After Peter Mansfield showed up at her house, Emily and the four men piled into a large Army jeep and drove off. Though a large part of her was nervous about what would happen, Peter Mansfield was very receptive to Emily's many questions.

"How many other people are we going to get?" she asked, noticing there was not much extra room in the Army jeep.

"None at the moment," Mansfield answered. "But over the next month, I will be tracking down approximately fifty more passengers for the last flight off Earth. From there, we will travel to the space station and join those already up in space during the 'Inaugural Month'."

"How do you expect to fit fifty more people in this jeep?" Emily wondered.

"We're on our way to the local airport right now, where a military helicopter is waiting to bring us to an undisclosed location,"

Mansfield explained. “You will stay there with the other passengers, while I go and collect everyone else.”

Emily felt safe in the presence of Mansfield, even though he was not as big or tough-looking as the Army guys accompanying him. Emily would have never guessed that Mansfield was disliked by just about every person he’d ever met. Still, she grew concerned about being left at an ‘undisclosed location,’ especially with nobody she knew.

“Don’t worry, my wife and kids will be there,” Mansfield explained after Emily voiced her concerns.

“Who else will be there when I arrive?”

“You are the first person we came to get,” Mansfield said. “If the world falls into disorder in the next few weeks, we wanted to make sure you were first at the safehouse.”

“Because of my handicap?” Emily asked, embarrassed.

“No, because you’re the most important person on my list. We couldn’t take the chance of something bad happening to you,” Mansfield told her. He left out the part about George Marshall insisting he keep his promise to Neil Peterson—Emily’s father and the doomed pilot from the failed deflection mission.

“Why am I important enough to be first?”

“You’ll find out one day,” Mansfield promised.

Although the response left Emily with more questions than answers, Mansfield turned his attention to the scenery just outside the window. The Army jeep approached a private gate to a small airport where they were given immediate clearance. It was dark out when they arrived and few planes were on the runway. The jeep drove straight to the helipad near the back of the airport, where Emily saw the most incredible vehicle she ever imagined.

“What is that?” Emily asked in awe.

Even as one of the military men in the front seat explained about the chopper, Emily did not absorb a single bit of information. All she knew was the helicopter was huge; it more resembled a flying fortress than the small, two-man helicopters she’d seen on TV. She was also amazed that there was a large ramp at the back of the vehicle,

which allowed the jeep to drive right inside. Once the jeep was secure, Mansfield helped Emily out of the jeep and showed her to her seat in the passenger section. They lifted off from the ground a few minutes later.

The ride lasted a few hours, though it felt much quicker to Emily since she'd napped along the way. When she woke shortly before dawn, Emily saw the helicopter slowly lowering out of the clouds. Looking down at the world below, all Emily saw for miles was sand. Despite its awesome size, this helicopter was quiet enough for her to hear the sound of snoring. She turned and looked across the aisle to Peter Mansfield, slouched in his seat, dead asleep. Emily grabbed one of her nearby crutches and gently poked Mansfield in the leg.

"I think something might be wrong," she told him. "It looks like we're about to land in the middle of the desert."

Momentarily confused, Mansfield glanced outside of his own window. When he turned back toward Emily, the knowing smile on his face made Emily feel safer.

"Don't worry, everything is going exactly to plan," Mansfield said.

Within seconds, Emily watched as four huge floodlights lit up the pre-dawn ground below, revealing a large opening crack in the sand-covered ground. As the helicopter got lower and lower to the ground, the crack in the Earth became wider and wider. Once it finally stopped opening, a platform rose to the surface, just large enough for the helicopter to land on.

"Wow, that was awesome," Emily said as the helicopter touched down on the ground. "I can't believe they can hide a landing pad that big."

"That was nothing," Mansfield said. "Wait until you see the launch pad for the space shuttle that's hidden underground. Now *that's* impressive."

"Where are we?" Emily asked.

"Arizona," Mansfield said. "Now come on, I'll give you the tour."

Upon exiting the helicopter, Emily and Mansfield left the platform and walked toward one of the two old buildings in the general vicinity. Mansfield explained that this had once been the site of a covert military base, one that did extensive testing on the newest planes for the Air Force. It had long since been shut down, making it the ideal location for construction of a hidden base.

“These buildings certainly aren’t impressive,” Emily said when they got closer to the first one. Up close, she could tell this building wasn’t just old. It was also quite dilapidated, possibly about to collapse on itself at any second. “Are you sure it’s safe?”

“Don’t let the exterior fool you,” Mansfield said. “The inside is structurally sound. We just let the outside remain decrepit-looking so nobody knows this facility is in use.”

“Who are you trying to fool? We’re out in the middle of desert. Who in their right mind wanders out here?” Emily asked.

“You’re right, not many people,” Mansfield said. “But we have to plan for the worst-case scenario.”

“Yeah, I guess whoever drove that truck got lost,” Emily said, pointing to a nearby flatbed truck that held a large storage container. Parked right outside of the building they were approaching, Emily had no idea how a truck driver could’ve gotten so lost that he ended up here.

“No, they found the place perfectly,” Mansfield said. “Since a lot of people are going to end up staying here, some supplies had to be brought in.”

Mansfield gave Emily a tour inside the building. There wasn’t much to the building’s interior, a couple of large rooms with outdated machines that had a layer of dust two inches thick. It was mostly dark, which did not make Emily feel any safer. But when they finally entered the last room—the biggest one of all—Emily saw the first signs of life. At the end of two long rows of Army cots, Emily spotted a woman and two children, both a few years younger than Emily.

Mansfield left Emily and approached the woman. He hugged her even though she did not look to be happy with him. The two kids seemed far less hesitant and immediately jumped on their father. After

Mansfield pointed in Emily's direction, the anger on his wife's face softened. She soon walked toward Emily, who suddenly felt shy about meeting a complete stranger. Thankfully, Mrs. Mansfield did not wear the expression of sympathy most people did upon meeting Emily.

After the proper introductions were made, Emily was relieved to find Mrs. Mansfield just as friendly as Peter. Since Emily seemed to be feeling a bit more comfortable, Peter informed her that he would be leaving now to continue his mission.

"Already?" Emily asked, surprised.

"Got a lot of people to get and not a lot of time to get them," Peter said. "We came here just to drop you off and fill up the gas tank."

"When will you be back?" Emily asked.

"I can't say for sure," Peter said. "We are dealing with a lot of unknown circumstances so our schedule isn't known for sure. But I'll be stopping in periodically to drop off other passengers. By the end of the week, you'll have plenty more people to talk to."

Peter kissed his wife on the cheek and smiled at Emily before turning to leave the room.

"You can choose any bed you want," Mrs. Mansfield said, making no offer to help Emily with her bag. Although some people might have found this rude, Emily was quite impressed that the woman allowed her to carry her own things. "Then you can come over and meet our kids. I was just about to make lunch."

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"We were starting to think you'd gotten lost," one of the helicopter pilots said when Mansfield emerged from the building and approached the chopper.

"Or that your wife finished the job and killed you," another Army pilot said to the laughter of his fellow partners. These three men had been with Mansfield since the day he told his wife about the comet and their special flight to the space station. Needless to say, Peter could not remember his wife being so angry with him. She did

not hesitate to voice her displeasure even when the three Army bodyguards arrived. Mansfield's wife was the only person in the world that could humiliate him in front of strangers and get away with it.

Mansfield's immediate reaction to joking normally would've been anger, but he realized that any power from his past life was greatly diminished. He needed these three men to survive the next month.

Before allowing himself a quick catnap on the flight to Arizona, he'd perused the list of 'specials' and their locations throughout the country and came to a decision about where they would travel next.

"Hollywood," Mansfield informed them. "We have to go to Hollywood next."

"What do you want to do, boss. Catch a movie?" one of the pilots asked.

"Just the opposite, boys," Mansfield told them. "I want to make a movie."



# CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Tyler knew that having so many wealthy people on board – so many strong-minded personalities in close quarters – would eventually lead to some sort of dispute. He just didn't think the first dispute would happen the day after everyone was brought aboard.

Most of Tyler's passengers slept through the morning and it wasn't until noontime that they began to emerge from their rooms. Less than an hour later, Tyler already received complaints from two different passengers, each of whom griped about the same topic: boredom.

"You said there would be activities aboard this ship," Roy Hopkins said. "And I thought the last few weeks at that trashy motel would be the *most* boring time of my life."

"You can take advantage of three entertainment rooms on board," Tyler explained, Hopkins and the other guests already knew about these rooms. "Our library consists of over a thousand books, our movie theater has nearly three-hundred movies to choose from and the gym contains a dozen exercise machines, not including five treadmills."

"I don't read books, I don't watch movies and I don't lift weights," Hopkins said. "I'm not going to be on the beach any time soon. Hell, I won't even be..." Hopkins stopped talking and glanced over his shoulder to make sure his wife wasn't within hearing range. "...I won't even be around any cheerleaders or interns for a long

time.”

Hopkins made the news on more than one occasion for inappropriate relationships he ‘supposedly’ had with cheerleaders who worked for the pro sports teams he owned. No proof ever surfaced from these tabloid allegations—the lack of solid, public proof being the reason his wife never left him—but Tyler got the message loud and clear that the tabloids were probably onto something.

“Once the boat sets sail, you will be able to watch the ocean scenery from a number of viewing ports located throughout the upper level. I also urge everyone on board to use this time wisely, especially by using the gym—and not just for cosmetic reasons,” Tyler explained. “When it’s safe to return to the surface and it comes time to return to land, it will be a totally different world from the one we’ve known, a world requiring much greater physical conditioning to survive.”

Jeremy Walker also approached Tyler with similar complaints.

“My wife needs to go and buy a few more things for the trip,” Jeremy told Tyler. “Besides, she’s going a little crazy sitting around, cooped up in the room all day. She could use some time off the ship.”

“Actually, it’s considered a boat,” Tyler said, wondering if anyone would ever listen to his explanation about the difference between the two terms.

“Whatever it is, we were wondering if we could get off for awhile since the ship won’t be setting sail for the next month,” Walker said.

There were certainly security risks with allowing guests off the seacraft. Tyler had been informed by Admiral Walter Matthews—whose demands likely came straight from the ‘Inner Circle’—that once passengers came aboard, they were not allowed to leave. Tyler knew his guests were used to having their every whim catered to and would not accept the truth without a fight. But Tyler was trying to avoid Admiral Matthews interfering in anything just yet. Besides, Tyler had too many problems of his own to start wars with the likes of Roy Hopkins or Jeremy Walker. In order to avoid this hassle, Tyler did the only thing he could think of: he lied.

“Believe me, I wish I could let you off the boat. *I* would like to

get off myself and take care of some last minute issues. But I've already received reports that most of the world is in utter chaos," Tyler said, making up the story as he went along. "Don't let the peace and quiet aboard the seacraft fool you into thinking the world is still safe; it's not. There are already reports of countrywide riots and looting, not to mention violence on an unprecedented level. It's getting so bad that law enforcers and military safekeepers have started abandoning their posts."

"Why weren't we told about this sooner?" Jeremy asked, horror appearing on his face.

"For the exact reason you look devastated," Tyler said. "I don't want everyone worrying too much. I didn't want to have to tell *anyone* that bad news. If you could keep that to yourself, I think we can save a lot of people unnecessary concern."

If there was one thing Tyler knew rich people loved to do as much as making money, it was gossiping. By telling Jeremy Walker not to tell anyone else about the 'chaos', Tyler just ensured that everyone on board *would* hear the story by the end of the day. He didn't especially think Walker was the type to spread news, but he would certainly tell his wife. Monica Walker would make sure Tyler's story spread like wildfire. Tyler knew women like Monica—beautiful, self-conscious women who loved the spotlight—and knew she would jump at the first opportunity to become the center of attention.

Tyler's explanation convinced Walker that staying on board was the only option. Once word spread, Tyler hoped this would be the end of anyone thinking about leaving the boat.

Walker disappeared from the lobby, no doubt off to tell his wife about the disarray on land. Tyler felt relieved that he dodged the first bullet fired at him. Feeling confident in his ability to be a leader and maintain control, he continued to ponder a resolution to the other problem recently brought to his attention. Stealth was definitely the way to handle his problem, especially since one of the culprits was going to be punished in the end regardless of what Bernard Jones had told him. Now Tyler would just have to make sure that the other person involved didn't know what he was up to—

“Excuse me, Mr. Ainsworth,” said the son of Bernard Jones.  
“But I think you might want to come handle this.”

“Handle what?” Tyler asked.

“Two people are arguing,” BJ Jones said. “And when kids at my school argue like this, they usually end up fighting. Like this one time, a boy in my gym class said that this other boy fouled him while playing basketball but the other boy—”

“Where is the argument?” Tyler interrupted.

BJ pointed toward the corridor where Tyler’s room was located.

“They’re in the movie room,” the boy said. “I went in there to see if you brought any cartoon movies, like this movie my mom just got me about these samurai cats who fight—”

Tyler took off toward the confrontation. Since many of the guests were already gathered in the lobby, Tyler didn’t want to warn the others of the potential fight. Though he walked swiftly toward the hallway, he still smiled and offered greetings to the passengers he passed along the way.

“Good morning, Heather, I hope you slept well,” Tyler said to the beautiful actress, the final person he encountered before entering the corridor. She smiled politely, but seemed in no mood to start a dialogue.

Once clear from prying eyes, Tyler ran down the empty hallway until he reached the theater room. Before he even entered the twenty-seat theater, Tyler could hear yelling voices. He entered the room and saw Roy Hopkins and Betsy Carollo, former actress and wife of the movie producer, yelling furiously at one another. In fact, Hopkins loomed a bit too threateningly over the middle-aged woman, though she showed no outward sign of being afraid. Tyler was sure to close the door behind him.

“I am not going to spend the next three hours watching an epic that wasn’t even good thirty years ago,” Roy yelled.

“Not even good?” Betsy yelled back, anger seething from her words. “It won numerous awards from critics across the country, not to mention awards I won for *my* individual performance.”

“Big deal, the majority of movies made back then are terrible,

despite any bogus award *you* might have won,” Hopkins countered.

Tyler realized another person was present. Marc sat in the front row of red, cushy seats, watching the argument with as much enjoyment as if watching an actual movie. Tyler immediately became angry with his dopey assistant, who should have known the importance of bringing the fight to a halt.

“I’m sorry if you’re too thick-headed and ignorant to understand that special effects are not as important as good writing and acting,” Betsy shot back. “But I would not expect a fool like you to understand.”

“Now *I’m* a fool?” Roy wondered loudly. “No, I’d only be a fool if I sat here for hours and watched this garbage.”

“Okay, everyone calm down,” Tyler said, trying to step between them. “There’s no need to resort to name-calling and insults. Mrs. Carollo, why don’t you tell me what’s going on?”

“I came into this room when it was *empty*—”

“Why does she get to explain first?” Hopkins interrupted.

“You see?” Betsy asked, pointing at Hopkins. “What kind of a *real man* interrupts a lady when she is speaking?”

“The *kind of man* who knows the difference between a good and bad movie,” Hopkins said.

“Please,” Tyler said, his voice rising just slightly louder than usual. “Mr. Hopkins, you will have your opportunity to explain.”

Before Betsy Carollo spoke again, Tyler heard the sound of the door creaking open and was worried their cover had been blown. Fortunately, it was only BJ.

“I was wondering if anyone chose a movie yet,” the boy said.

Tyler turned back to the former actress, who explained that she had been perusing the large selection of movies for nearly ten minutes, carefully narrowing down the choices she wanted to watch.

“Then, *Mr. Hopkins* burst into the room, grabbed the first low-quality action movie he found and insisted on watching it first,” Betsy explained. “He said I didn’t decide quickly enough. He was obviously too thick-headed to listen to reason and—”

“I can’t take this,” Hopkins yelled.

“Don’t interrupt me,” Betsy yelled, finally losing her cool.

“She was too busy staring at the pictures of her younger self on the covers to choose,” Hopkins mocked.

“Why you son of a—”

“What’s going on in here?” a gruff-sounding voice asked.

Before Tyler even turned to see who was standing in the doorway, he realized the worst person to overhear the argument had walked by at the worst possible moment.

“It’s nothing that *you* should be concerned with,” Roy Hopkins snapped at Admiral Walter Matthews, whose older age and shorter stature did not make him appear threatening.

“This man is in charge of the boat,” Marc said, finally interjecting.

“And I’m trying to make sure the ladies aboard this vessel are treated with the utmost respect. I would hope you could understand the importance of that,” the admiral growled in Roy and Tyler’s directions. Tyler knew the admiral well enough to nod in agreement, yet he was surprised to see the old man soften when he turned to the aging actress. “Miss Carollo, I just wanted to let you know that I’m glad to have a beautiful lady like yourself aboard the boat. Plus, you’re a very fine actress; I can’t tell you how many times I’ve seen *Broken Sunset*.”

Betsy Carollo smiled and held up the copy of *Broken Sunset* that she’d been trying to play.

“Why don’t you pop it in and get the movie started, ” Admiral Matthews said.

“Believe me,” Betsy said, flashing Roy Hopkins her most superior glance. “I’ve been trying to do just that.”

“I don’t know if you know who I am,” Roy Hopkins said to the admiral, making no attempt to hide his disdain. “But I am a very important man out in the world, and I don’t take orders from you or anyone else who—”

As suddenly as Admiral Matthews transformed into a gentleman, he just as quickly turned into the cranky old sailor. Much to the surprise of the wealthy sports teams owner, the admiral had no

qualms about getting physical. Moving with speed that a man half his age would have been proud of, Matthews crossed the room, grabbed the front of Roy's shirt and drove him back into the wall. Hopkins was a very prideful man and did not want to lose face in front of the others. He tried to tear himself away from Matthews, but the admiral's grip was vice-like.

"Get off of me, you fool," Hopkins said, though the admiral did not even consider complying.

"You will refer to me in the future as Admiral, Admiral Matthews or sir," Matthews said. "And if you ever speak to me with such indignation again—or if I ever see or hear of you disrespecting a woman on this boat again—I will make sure you find yourself taking a long swim in the ocean. Understand?"

Hopkins continued to wriggle for several more long, tense moments. But when he finally realized his struggles were getting him nowhere, all of the fight went out of him and his body slackened.

"Understand?" Matthews repeated.

"Yeah," Hopkins finally answered.

"Yeah what?" Matthews asked, maintaining his firm grip.

"Yeah, Admiral."

With that, Matthews let the man go, stepped aside and gestured for Hopkins to leave the room.

"Now have a nice day, sir," Admiral Matthews said to the retreating millionaire. "And enjoy your stay."

Hopkins rushed from the room, but not before he shot Tyler an incensed look. Matthews turned back toward Betsy Carollo, who continued to look pleased.

"Now try and play a little nicer next time," he said, the way a father might playfully chide his daughter after having yelled at his son. "And if that creep gives you any more trouble, make sure to come and see me."

"Thank you, Admiral," Betsy said with all the charm of a damsel in distress just rescued. "You are truly a gentleman."

Admiral Matthews left the room as well, cheerfully patting BJ on the head on his way out.

“I guess we’re going to watch *Broken Sunset* then,” the boy said.

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Knowing that Roy Hopkins’s displeasure with the admiral would become the hot topic of conversation aboard the seacraft, Tyler realized that he could not sit by idly. Tyler hurried behind Matthews. But rather than stop the admiral right away, Tyler decided to see where he was going to first.

Admiral Matthews made a beeline toward the stairwell leading to the lower deck. Tyler didn’t know what he was going to say to the old man. Matthews had always been a difficult man to judge.

Matthews disappeared down the stairs. Tyler followed, trying to formulate the exact words he would say to Matthews, the perfect words to get his point across but not upset the older man. He hoped to have a few minutes to think, but found the old man standing at the bottom of the steps, looking up at him.

“Why are you following me?” the admiral asked.

“You saw me?” Tyler asked, and then added, “Sir.”

“Come on, kid. You’re not the sneakiest guy around here,” the admiral said, unable to contain a self-satisfied smile. “I knew you were going to follow me the second I walked out of that movie room.”

“Do you know *why* I followed you then?” Tyler asked.

Admiral Matthews suddenly looked very serious.

“I don’t have time for this,” Matthews said, now quite irked. “We set sail in a few weeks and I’m still trying to plan the best course of action to deal with possible disasters. If you don’t mind, I’d rather not stand around and play word games.”

Moments like these made Tyler realize just how difficult it would be with the admiral in charge.

“Believe me, Admiral Matthews, I’ve made sure to build a fine boat,” Tyler said, speaking the words slowly in an effort to maintain his composure. “I don’t think you’ll have to deal with any disasters.”

The admiral chuckled a laugh that could only be described as disdainful.



“After all the years I’ve spent in underwater crafts, do you think *you’re* the one who should make that call?” Matthews asked. “If there’s one thing I know, it’s that not having contingency plans can lead to the death of every person on board. I’m sure that’s not something you want. I know you didn’t come here to exchange our resumes, though, so get to the point already!”

Tyler bit his tongue, reminding himself that he could only deal with one problem at a time.

“The incident in the movie room,” Tyler said.

“There was a problem you didn’t seem to be handling,” the admiral said. “I couldn’t allow a man to speak to a lady in such a manner, and I especially couldn’t allow him to treat me with disrespect. If that man had been a seaman aboard any of my vessels, I would’ve had him locked up in a heartbeat.”

“These people aren’t *seamen*,” Tyler said. No matter what he said to Matthews, the admiral would not be able to see things his way. But Tyler still had to try; he owed it to his passengers. “These people are guests aboard my boat, and *they* aren’t used to being spoken to in such a manner.”

“Now you’re going to tell me how to act?” Admiral Matthews asked. “I have a lot more experience controlling men in this type of atmosphere. If I have to put my foot down to show them who is in charge, you’d better believe I’m going to do just that. Look, I recognize who some of your guests are, and I realize that if they are here right now, they must be rich. But while we’re on the subject of improving relations between myself and your guests, I was thinking I might be able to make a better connection with everyone if I lived among them,” the admiral said.

“You want one of the nice rooms?” Tyler said, unable to contain the surprise in his voice. “I mean, I thought you liked living down here, in the surroundings you find most familiar.”

The admiral chuckled.

“You think I actually *like* living in these tight, uncomfortable rooms?” Admiral Matthews asked. “I’ve been living in oversized cabinets like these for more than thirty years now. Being in charge of

the seacraft should allow me some sort of privilege, don't you think?"

"Certainly, certainly," Tyler said, frantically trying to think of an excuse to deny the admiral's request. Tyler was sure that Roy Hopkins was telling the rest of the guests about the rude, belligerent admiral. Putting Matthews among the passengers upstairs would be an insult to every refined person on board. But Tyler realized that an excuse was not needed here; the truth actually helped him for once. "But I'm afraid there aren't any rooms available upstairs."

"Marc told me that one of your guests hasn't arrived," the admiral retorted. "That means one room should be empty."

"That's not the case. I currently have someone living in that extra room."

Admiral Matthews took a few steps toward Tyler. By the time he stopped, the admiral was only a foot away from Tyler, who did not feel physically superior even though he looked down at Matthews, who was six inches shorter.

"We will be spending a lot of time together aboard this boat. I am asking you for a favor—one that might be difficult to figure out, but one that I'm sure you can make happen," the admiral said, his voice calmer than usual. "I know you're going to ask me favors during our long journey, and I might look more kindly on your future requests if I know you reciprocate."

Tyler did not know what to say. He was fighting a losing battle.

"Please don't make me have to demand this," the admiral said after several long moments of silence.

"I was trying to think where I can free up a room for you," Tyler said. "Of course I will grant your request, but I need a little time to think where I can put you."

The admiral smiled.

"Good, you take your time and get back to me," Matthews said. "If you'll excuse me, I have work to do."

The admiral turned and walked off down the narrow hallway, leaving Tyler standing at the bottom of the staircase. Now that he'd dealt with the second problem on board, a third suddenly arose.

# CHAPTER FOURTEEN

During the first few days after the comet announcement, many sections of America began to slowly transform. The amount of violence was up, many people abandoned their jobs, nothing seemed to run as smoothly as before. But there was still one place where the show still went on, literally: Hollywood. Peter Mansfield never visited a movie studio, but the lot of *Minko Studios* was hectic. Everyone on the lot seemed to be in a mad rush, a strange scene considering most people were in a variety of costumes. For some reason, Mansfield had the feeling this chaos was exactly how the studio always ran.

The only thing that seemed unusual was the level of security on the movie lot. Because Mansfield's arrival was unscheduled and unannounced, it took him nearly an hour to gain entrance to the huge lot. It took nearly another hour to navigate the large space and two dozen different sound stages before Mansfield and his men found the correct one. The door to the largest building on the entire lot was labeled "Building a Dream." In conjunction with the tight security at the main entrance, Mansfield also found it nearly impossible to get inside this sound stage.

"I was told by the owner of this studio—*your boss*—that I was to have complete access to any and all areas I wished to enter," Peter Mansfield told the burly man standing at the door to the sound stage. The large man remained in front of the entrance, his arms folded across his massive chest.

“Do you see that red light, sir?” the large security guard asked. A large red light bulb above the door shone brightly.

“Of course I see it,” Mansfield said.

“Then I don’t care if you’re God Himself. You’re not getting in at this moment,” the guard said. “That red light means filming is going on and this door is not to be opened under any circumstance.”

“Do you know how much longer before I can go in?” Mansfield asked. “It’s imperative I speak to Lucas Stevens as soon as possible.”

“Good luck with that. I hear Mr. Stevens doesn’t deal well with strangers,” the guard said, his arms still crossed.

“I can be persuasive,” Mansfield said. “But you didn’t answer my first question. How much longer until I can go in?”

“As soon as that red light goes off,” the guard answered stubbornly.

Frustrated that he’d traveled so far to meet Lucas Stevens and now had to stand around and wait, Mansfield walked away from the security guard and rejoined his military bodyguards.

“Do you want us to take care of him?” one of his bodyguards asked.

Although Peter was tempted to take his man up on this offer, the last thing Mansfield wanted was to anger Lucas Stevens. Luckily, he only had to wait another ten minutes before the light blinked off. Mansfield quickly jogged to the entrance, where the guard finally stood aside and opened the door for him.

“Enjoy your visit, sir,” the security guard said with a hint of sarcasm in his voice. “Please be sure to follow orders from the set if filming begins to roll again.”

The building was just as chaotic as the rest of the movie lot. Mansfield hardly noticed the craziness happening around him, though, as his attention was focused solely on the amazing set. In fact, he stood motionless for nearly a minute, just staring at the set. If any of the cast and crew of “Building a Dream” hadn’t been so busy themselves, somebody might have wondered why Mansfield stood frozen, gazing at the replica of the partially-constructed space station, hanging suspended twenty feet in the air.

The elaborate set consisted of a detailed, authentic version of a large section of space station, apparently from during the earlier stages of construction. As large as the model was, it was small in comparison to the rest of the sound stage, which included an expansive backdrop of the rest of space and a huge representation of the Earth below. Thousands of wires and cords ran around the set, and nearly a dozen different cameras (some mounted high on cranes, some with a long angle from the ground) were strategically placed around the station to capture every possible view. While Mansfield had seen plenty of photographs and video footage of the space station during every different stage of construction, this was the first time he experienced the station up close—even if this model was only a fraction of the actual size.

By the time Mansfield recovered from the shock of seeing this set, he noticed some serious changes being made to the backdrop. For some reason, the black, space background was being removed.

“Let’s bring in the green screen,” the set director called to his workers, who seemed to move at a very quick pace (yet apparently not quick enough). “Let’s move it people, Mr. Stevens wants to get this last shot finished before lunch.”

Not only was a green screen quickly installed, but Mansfield saw two actors - both clad in spacesuits - being raised by a complex wiring system so they hung just above the space station. Things were happening quickly on set and Mansfield realized had to locate Stevens right away. He scanned the large crowd until he found the one person dressed unlike all the others, a scruffy-haired man dressed in blue jeans and a ratty old T-shirt. Surrounded by nearly a dozen men and women in expensive suits, Lucas Stevens looked like part of the stage crew even though he was the hottest director of the past decade. Before Mansfield had the chance to approach him, the others peeled away from Stevens as one of them addressed the entire sound stage.

“We need quiet on the set! Quiet everyone!” yelled a particularly well-dressed woman who stood among the group near Stevens.

All of the hustle and bustle occurring around Mansfield

immediately came to a halt. If a pin had dropped, the entire crew could've heard it. Mansfield watched as Lucas Stevens spoke to the woman, who loudly called out his direction.

"Cue the smoke!"

A soft hissing sound was followed by tiny amounts of smoke being released from somewhere inside the space station set. The smoke gradually formed around the two suspended actors in astronaut gear. If Mansfield hadn't known better, he might have really thought there was fire on the space station.

"Sound rolling!" the woman yelled.

Finally, Lucas Stevens stepped forward and called out the one word that made him the director.

"Action!"

The superior sound equipment allowed Mansfield to hear every word spoken by the actors, even though the two men were twenty feet above him. A larger cloud of smoke soon erupted from the set and a large piece of the space station broke away from the rest, though it dangled on a wire only a few feet from the actors.

"I have to try to reach it," the first actor said in a thick Russian accent, though Mansfield doubted its authenticity. "We can not let this piece float away."

Mansfield watched as the Russian astronaut slowly moved toward the broken piece of the space station.

"No, Sergei," the American astronaut/actor said. "It's not worth your life, we can fix the problem later."

The Russian stopped and turned to face his American counterpart, as the broken space station piece now floated just out of reach.

"It could be too late by then, Frank," the Russian said. "We have to make sure everything goes well."

"But you could die," the American pleaded.

"Then I will die building a dream," the Russian said.

The Russian moved more quickly toward the broken piece, the wires moving the actor away from the space station as if floating in a weightless atmosphere. Once he grabbed the broken piece and turned

triumphantly toward the American, Lucas Stevens yelled the next demand.

“Cue the explosion!”

Suddenly, a small explosion near the Russian astronaut blew pieces of the space station all around and more smoke flowed from the set. The wiring system carried the Russian farther away from the space station, as the explosion set him flying back.

“Noooooooo!” the American yelled, as he rushed across the space station, soaring toward the Russian. Mansfield marveled at how none of the wires moving the two men ever became tangled; the stunt coordinators seemed to be the real heroes of this operation. The American moved closer and closer and extended his hand to the Russian, who never lost his grip on the broken space station piece.

“Grab my hand!” the American called.

Just as their hands nearly met, Lucas Stevens called out his final directive for this scene.

“Cue the second explosion!”

Another explosion - this one much larger than the first - rocked the space station and sent the two astronauts flying apart from each other and farther away from the space station. For nearly five seconds, the two astronauts/actors drifted backward until the wiring system finally brought them to a stop.

“Cut!” Stevens yelled. “That’s a print. Let’s break for lunch for the next hour.”

There was a smattering of applause throughout the sound stage, as one of the more crucial scenes seemed to have gone exactly as planned. Mansfield glanced over at the director, again surrounded by the large group of people, huddled around a small monitor. The two actors were lowered from the wires and unhooked, each taking off their helmets as they walked away. As the rest of the crew cleared off the set, the two actors walked right past Mansfield, as the one wearing the Russian spacesuit bumped into him.

“Watch where you’re going, partner,” the actor said in a heavy southern drawl.

Once a few of the ‘suits’ around Stevens left, Mansfield finally

took this opening to approach the director. He received quite a few distrusting glares from those around Stevens, but the director himself was too busy looking at footage to even notice Mansfield's appearance.

"Excuse me, Mr. Stevens, but I need to speak with you, sir," Mansfield said, attempting to sound as polite as possible. When the director turned around, he looked surprised to see a strange face standing among his usual followers.

"I'm sorry, but everyone knows the rules," Stevens said. "If you have something to say, you go through the AD before coming to me."

He turned back toward the monitor and the woman who called out stage directions approached Mansfield. But after waiting countless times today, Peter was in no mood to explain the importance of speaking to Stevens.

"Look, Stevens, my patience is wearing thin," Mansfield said, ignoring the shocked expressions on the faces of the brown-nosers around him. "I don't give a damn about your movie or about your people here, but I do need to talk to you about your directing talent."

"How dare you talk to Lucas Stevens like that. Don't you know \_\_\_\_"

Lucas Stevens put up his hand to stop his assistant director, who looked ready to rip Mansfield's head off.

"That's okay, Amanda, I respect this guy isn't a pushover like a lot of other people around here," the director said. "What exactly is this about?"

"It's about doing a great service for the future of our planet," Mansfield said simply.

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Lucas Stevens showed Mansfield into his large trailer just outside the sound stage. The interior was furnished with more gadgetry than Peter could ever afford. Multiple flat-panel televisions adorned every wall, surround-sound speakers hung from every corner and expensive leather couches and lounge chairs were scattered about.



It was an entertainment complex unlike Mansfield could have ever imagined (even if he thought the twelve TVs were a bit much).

“Can I get you something to drink, Mr. Mansfield?” Stevens asked as Peter looked around.

“No,” Mansfield replied. “But I do have a question before we get to business.”

Upon seeing Mansfield’s all-access badge and then speaking personally with the reclusive owner of *Minko Studios*, Lucas Stevens realized that this stranger who suddenly showed up must be very important.

“I think you might be jumping the gun in thinking we’ll do business,” Stevens said. “But shoot away.”

“Why is Hollywood not affected by the threat of the comet as much as the rest of America?” Mansfield asked.

This question immediately eliminated one possibility in Stevens’s mind about Mansfield’s reason for being there: the man was obviously not in show business, which meant no movie deal was likely coming.

“I’ve seen other cities and towns around the country the past few days,” Mansfield continued. “And things have changed. People are staying home, businesses are shutting down. Yet everything around here seems to be business as usual.”

“Actually, people around here have been willing to work longer hours than usual,” Stevens explained. “There’s more of a rush than ever to get these movies finished quicker. I’m under such a tight schedule now to get “Building a Dream” completed that I’ve had to cut down my number of takes per scene.”

“That’s what I don’t understand,” Mansfield said. “I would think that making movies would be the last thing on everyone’s mind right about now.”

Stevens smiled, which left Mansfield the strange feeling that the director had purposely led him to reaching this conclusion.

“And that’s why you wouldn’t make a good movie executive,” Stevens said. “People are afraid now. All that anyone can think about is the threat of this deadly comet coming to destroy the world. We

have to keep making movies to give the public something to make them forget, a means to escape this horrible future that the media and the government are trying to portray. Just look at the box office numbers from the last few days.”

“What about them?” Mansfield asked.

“The number of movie tickets sold has nearly quadrupled the number of last week’s sales, before anyone ever knew about Comet Clement,” the director said. “As long as we keep pumping out films, we’ll keep bringing in the cash. Not to mention the absolute perfect timing of this announcement as far as “Building a Dream” is concerned.”

“And why is that?” Mansfield asked.

“We wrap principal photography in a couple days, which means the movie will be in theaters near the end of August, right around the time the comet is *supposed* to strike,” Stevens said. “Since I’ve made a space-related film, one especially relevant to current affairs, the amount of free press we’ll receive should guarantee that “Building a Dream” is one of the most profitable movies ever.”

Mansfield was amazed the director seemed so proud about how much money he’d make, though he seemed to be forgetting one major detail.

“Won’t it be tough to make millions when the comet has already destroyed most of the earth and humanity?” Mansfield asked.

Mansfield thought he made an obvious argument, but he could immediately tell that Stevens wasn’t buying any of this.

“Not *when* the comet strikes, *if* the comet strikes,” Stevens retorted. “It seems obvious that Comet Clement is not as serious a threat as the government makes it out to be.”

“You may have watched one too many conspiracy theorist movies if you believe that,” Mansfield said, unable to control his sarcasm. “How can you be so positive the comet will miss Earth?”

“I can’t be *completely* sure,” Stevens said, “but I see little reason to sit around and worry about it. If I keep filming my movie and the comet *does* strike the Earth and destroy everything, then I guess it wouldn’t have really mattered that I finished making “Building a

Dream.” But if I sit around and stop working and worry for the last three months of my life, *doing that* wouldn’t really matter, either. I’d rather spend the time preparing to make a boatload of money if Clement does what I think it will do and harmlessly pass us by.”

“I can tell you’re a glass-half-full kind of person,” Mansfield said.

“The world is too technologically advanced to allow a big chunk of rock to destroy it. Believe me, I’ve seen what can be done with technology in making movies,” Stevens said. “I can’t imagine the tricks the government has up its sleeve to deal with this problem.”

If the majority of Americans shared this same opinion as Stevens, the impending pandemonium might not be as bad as the ‘Inner Circle’ feared it would become. Unfortunately, Mansfield could not allow Lucas Stevens to continue assuming the best conceivable outcome was a possibility.

“What if I told you that the comet *will* strike the Earth—as expected—on August 22,” Mansfield said.

“I believe you about as much as I believe what they’re saying on TV,” Stevens said.

“Then I’d tell you I know more about the comet situation than any TV program,” Mansfield said. “In fact, I know inside information that less than ten people in the entire *world* know.”

“Exactly who *are* you?” the director asked.

For the next twenty minutes, Peter Mansfield told Lucas Stevens who he was, who he worked for and how he knew the comet strike was an inevitability. He explained the failed attempt to deflect the comet and that no further attempts could stop the worst from happening.

“What about hitting it with a nuke?” Stevens wondered. “Couldn’t that destroy the comet before it hit?”

Mansfield shook his head, having heard a similar theory every time somebody was told that the comet could not be stopped.

“That’s what everyone assumes. I can only imagine people have gotten too much information from movies,” Mansfield said. “Tell me this: did you know that when those two astronauts died during space

construction, it was the American who messed up and the Russian who died trying to save him?"

"Yeah, but it made for a better story the other way around," Stevens said. "A lot of movies based upon actual events aren't portrayed exactly how they happened. Writers always take liberties for the sake of improving story lines. Creative license."

"And that's exactly why people get the wrong impression of reality," Mansfield said. "People see movies where comets threaten the Earth and are blown up at the last minute to save the day. Unfortunately, it doesn't work like that. Firing a nuke at the comet would have the same effect as trying to stop a shotgun blast with a thin piece of glass. Even if a bomb did somehow cause enough damage to break the comet apart, the Earth would be pelted by thousands of smaller comets instead of a single large one. The damage caused by this would be just as bad, if not worse."

For the first time since Mansfield saw Stevens, the brazen look etched on the director's face was replaced with an expression of concern.

"Then that's it? Regardless of whether I finish my movie or not, the comet is coming to kill me?"

"The answer to that question is hanging in your sound stage," Mansfield answered. "Or at least a replica of it."

"The space station? I highly doubt they're accepting last-minute reservations," Stevens said. "Besides, the station is miles above the Earth. I don't think my private jet could make it past 40,000 feet."

"It's a good thing that I have a spot reserved for you on board the space station," Mansfield said. "Not to mention a seat on the last shuttle flight leaving Earth. And all that I ask of you is to put your God-given talent to use one final time, for your country and for the rest of humanity."

"You want me to direct the comet strike?" Stevens figured out. The director always figured out the direction of a pitch before he heard every detail.

"This project will require your greatest skill," Mansfield said. "But we have every confidence you can do it."

“You never struck me as the movie-buff type,” Stevens said.

“I’m not,” Mansfield admitted. “But you did win the Academy Award for Best Director the last two years; that makes you our guy.”

“But how do you expect me to shoot this footage *and* still make the last shuttle trip off Earth?” Stevens asked.

Mansfield went on to explain that Stevens would be provided twenty fortified video cameras, cameras he had the next few months to place in strategic locations around the world. As soon as these cameras were in place, the director would rejoin the other ‘specials’ that were saved spots on the space station. Once Stevens was aboard, the cameras would be turned on remotely and the pictures would be beamed up to the space station. A small editing station had been installed on the station especially for the director.

“The final footage of the Earth’s last days will be at your disposal,” Mansfield explained. “And then you can make the world’s final movie, at least the final movie for a very long time. That movie will be used as a historical record for many years to come.”

The thought of generations viewing his work for hundreds of years to come appealed to Stevens’ sense of ego. His worry from a few minutes earlier once again transformed back into his usual boldness.

“When do I leave?”

# CHAPTER FIFTEEN

JUNE 3, 2020

TWO MONTHS, NINETEEN DAYS UNTIL IMPACT...

With nothing to do on board the space station—mostly self-imposed since he refused to volunteer his services—Wesley Maddox thought time seemed to move slower than ever before. No words could describe exactly how he felt; incredible boredom might have been closest, but that did not capture the maddening monotony of Maddox's last few weeks. It had gotten so bad that he was planning ways to escape the station, lies that might force George Marshall to plan a special trip back to Earth for the former project leader. Of course Maddox knew he would never put those plans into action. But thinking of ways to get off the station was one of the few things that helped pass the time.

Thinking about money was another of Maddox's favorite activities. Maddox would be incredibly wealthy upon returning to Earth, as the millions he banked from getting the space station built ahead of schedule were already sitting in his bank account, waiting to be spent. His animosity toward delayed freedom and having spent years aboard the space station did not allow Maddox the same amount of awe the rest of the passengers felt about their experience.

*Not much longer*, Maddox kept telling himself over and over, a sort of personal mantra he adapted over the last few weeks. *Not much longer until you'll be relaxing on white sandy beaches.*

Maddox kept trying to convince himself that this would be the case, but the cold hand of doubt began to creep into his mind. The former project leader finally ventured around the station the past few days. For the same reason he stayed to himself during most of the ‘Inaugural Month,’ Maddox forced himself to suffer through the same problem he faced during the first few days: he was just too popular.

Everyone selected to the space station this month had done their homework about the station’s history. Besides President George Marshall and his wife, Maddox was the next most recognizable person on board. This immediately made him the third most coveted person on board to converse with. Maddox didn’t know how George Marshall could handle the constant bombardment of questions. But unless he wanted to stay cooped up in his room for the final days of the inaugural month, he had to grin and bear the stares and kind words from his fellow guests.

But during times Maddox escaped talking with people, he noticed a few things happening around the station that made him question whether everyone would be leaving any time soon. An awful lot of cargo ships docked with the space station, none seemed to bring anything on board except supplies. It was true a space station filled with this many people needed a great deal of supplies. But the daily arrival of cargo ships made it seem likely that the space station was stocking up on inventory rather than simply re-supplying. The quick turnaround time of these ships—quicker than what was safe—made Maddox wonder why there was such a rush to get the station overstocked on food.

“Look who’s out and about,” Maddox heard a feminine voice say as he stared out a window along the corridor adjacent to the docking station. Unlike most other voices Maddox had heard recently, this one was welcome.

“Yeah, what fun is floating around in a little room all day?” he asked.

“That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you,” Lillian Edwards said.

Although Lily spoke as her usual friendly self, Maddox spent enough time with her to recognize when something was on her mind.

He felt his stomach turning circles and for once it wasn't due to a lack of gravity.

"Can I ask you something? Do you know why there have been so many shuttles dropping off supplies the past few days?" he asked, turning back toward the window. "There's another out here now. Don't you think it's odd that all these supplies are being brought aboard, like they don't expect us to leave any time soon?"

"They're probably just running tests to determine the durability of the docking station."

"It would be crazy to run such a test with all these people on board," Maddox said.

"I don't know," Lily said. "I think you're just reading into things too much."

"What about departure plans?" Maddox asked. "Don't you think it's strange the month is coming to an end but there have been no discussions—even preliminary ones—with passengers about leaving?"

Maddox had the strong feeling Lily was keeping something from him. Before this conversation, Maddox could never remember a time when she avoided eye contact when speaking to him.

"Everyone is having such a good time that nobody wants it ruined by extensive talks about exit preparations," Lily said. "I certainly don't want to think about leaving yet."

"That makes one of us."

Lily knew Maddox's feelings about being aboard the space station. She did not want to talk any further about this subject. She excused herself from Maddox, saying that she had tons of safety inspections to finish. When the former project leader watched his protégé float down the corridor and enter the command corner piece, Maddox thought he saw George Marshall waiting for her.

Maddox hated that paranoia suddenly gripped him. He knew he should just turn around, forget the conversation with Lily and return to the quiet of his room. But curiosity got the better of him and he headed toward the corner piece, where he decided to question the former president to see if Marshall knew something he wasn't telling anyone else. Upon entering the nearby corner piece, Maddox watched



both Marshall and Lily enter the command center. The door closed just before Maddox reached it. But when he took out his own access card and entered it into the slot next to the door, the small red light remained lit and the door stayed closed.

This was the first time during the ‘Inaugural Month’ that he tried using his keycard. He inserted it a few more times, but was met with the same denied result each time. Maddox considered knocking to see if Lily or Marshall would let him in, but could not think of something to say that would make him appear anything but strange.

Instead, he turned and left the corner piece, barely making it back to the corridor before another passenger stopped him and explained one of the ‘exciting’ (i.e. boring) experiments that she conducted.

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Nigel Huffington spent little time in his room aboard the seacraft, even though he never expected to leave his personal space. After spending years in the large room next to Tyler’s, Nigel was having trouble adjusting to his new room. Unfortunately, he could not view his new living space as a room; doing that would be a serious injustice to the word ‘room.’ The walls were too close together to ever relax in his new ‘oversized closet,’ especially since it reminded him of one of those padded rooms in a psychiatric facility. And considering Nigel’s past in such a facility, he was not looking forward to having flashbacks of that dark time in his life.

Nigel spent a lot of time reading in the boat’s library or relaxing on one of the dozens of leather sofas and lounge chairs in the huge lobby. Nigel’s plan had been to avoid all of Tyler’s wealthy guests, and the passengers on board had the same plan for him. Nobody knew who he was, and nobody knew anything about him. Therefore, Nigel figured most of the rich snobs assumed he was merely the ‘hired help.’

At first, Huffington didn’t have a problem with this, even if the looks of disgust he’d received were slightly offensive. Still, as long as

it meant he was being left alone, he could deal with a couple of dirty looks. But when some of the guests began to notice he was not a worker, they looked at him in another way, one that made him infinitely more uncomfortable. They seemed to be curious about him.

There was little doubt in Nigel's mind that the government could place a mole among the passengers, a mole to spy on Nigel and figure out his true identity.

"What's your name?"

Nigel was sitting on a chair in the corner of the lobby, trying to read his copy of *The Count of Monte Cristo* while ignoring those around him. He couldn't help taking occasional glances over the top of his book to see if anyone looked in his direction for too long. But none of the others seemed to take very much interest in him today. That was why Nigel became so startled to hear the sound of a voice so close to him. When he put down his book and saw the person sitting across from him, Nigel immediately realized how he could've sneaked up on him.

"What's your name?" the boy repeated. "I'm BJ Jones."

"I'm Nigel," he answered. Nigel raised his book again in an attempt to dissuade further conversation. Apparently, BJ didn't take the hint.

"My dad is Bernard Jones," BJ said. "He owns a big computer company."

"Yeah, I've heard of it before," Nigel said.

"What are you reading?" BJ asked.

Nigel sighed and lowered his book again. The kid obviously didn't get the hint. Kids rarely understood such subtleties.

"*The Count of Monte Cristo*, by Alexandre Dumas," Nigel said.

"What's it about?" the boy asked.

"A man was wrongly imprisoned, broke out of jail, assumed a new identity and took vengeance on those who'd done him wrong in the past," Nigel explained, summarizing the classic French novel in as simple terms as possible.

"Sounds pretty cool," BJ said. "I mostly read books about computers. I always wanted to be like my dad and work in the family

business one day...but I guess there won't be much use for computers after the comet blows up everything."

"No, I suppose not," Nigel said.

The little boy looked sad at the mention of the comet, but Nigel did not know what to say to make him feel better. He'd worked with children at one point his life, but Nigel was a totally different person back then. Besides, there was rarely a time Nigel worried about his students' feelings when giving a lesson on photosynthesis or the nine planets. Fortunately for Nigel, BJ Jones shifted their conversation.

"So what did you do for a job before you heard about the comet?" the boy asked.

Warning bells suddenly erupted in Nigel's mind and he quickly looked around the lobby. Nobody stared at him, but he worried there were more eyes on him right now. Nigel thought he knew what the government had done and *whom* they had sent to spy on him.

"What do you want to know?" Nigel asked, closing his book.

"I don't know," BJ said. "I was just wondering."

The kid was convincing, that was for sure. But Nigel was already one step ahead of him. It was just like the government to use a young boy as their spy, a kid being the only person who might get Nigel to lower his defenses and come clean about his past. But Nigel was too smart to fall for such a ploy.

"I'm sorry, I forgot that I have somewhere to be right now," he said, glancing down at his watch.

Nigel jumped out of his chair and quickly walked toward the corridor closest to him. He cursed himself for thinking he could mingle with the rest of the guests, especially since he'd made it so many years. It would be silly to be discovered mere months before the comet strike. As small and cramped as his room might be, Nigel knew he would have to endure the confined quarters for these final few months. Once the comet finally smashed into the Earth, then he would be able to—

Nigel's heart nearly burst through his chest when he felt someone tugging on the back of his shirt. When he turned around to see the small boy right behind him—in the *empty* hallway, nonetheless

—Nigel never felt so nervous that his identity had finally been figured out.

“You forgot your book,” BJ said, handing Nigel the worn copy of *Monte Cristo*.

As the kid turned and walked back toward the lobby, Nigel’s heart rate began to slow down, but not much.

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For the second time in minutes, Nigel was caught off guard. But at least the second encounter was with someone Nigel *knew* didn’t work for the government.

“Could you come into my room for a minute?” Tyler Ainsworth asked. The door to Tyler’s room was open and he stuck his head out when Nigel wandered by. “I need to discuss something with you.”

Nigel entered the room and Tyler pointed him toward the desk in the corner. Tyler closed the door for total privacy.

“I’m glad I caught you,” Tyler said as he sat across from Nigel. “I’ve been meaning to talk to you since we came aboard, but playing cruise director has been more time-consuming than I expected. Who knew rich people were so hard to please?”

Nigel forced a friendly smile, but his mind was on too many other things to have the patience for small talk.

“You’re the only person aboard the entire boat that I trust,” Tyler started off. Nigel felt a twinge of guilt since he’d told Marc about Tyler’s plan to get him off the seacraft. “So you’re the only person whose opinion I value enough to ask for advice.”

“About what?” Nigel asked, intrigued to hear what Tyler was about to tell him.

“A situation I’m sure you can understand,” Tyler explained. “It’s the government. They’re trying to screw me over again.”

Nigel felt his chest tighten at the mention of the government, especially since he was currently in his own predicament about the secret operative he was certain was aboard the boat.

“Screwing you over?” Nigel asked. “What are they doing to

you?”

“Once the government-appointed passengers came aboard within the next few weeks, I planned to head for deep water right away to test for any problems before the comet strikes,” Tyler said. “To be completely honest, I’m starting to get worried that the natives are getting restless. We’ve only been aboard for a few days and arguments are breaking out because everyone is bored, not to mention the fact that most of my guests hate the admiral because of what he did to—

“That’s all besides the point. The government has informed me that once their people arrive, we must perform a two-week trial run along the coast so they can track our movements. That means we can’t go into deep water right away. We’re supposed to radio in our progress on a regular basis, but we don’t even have the equipment on board to broadcast a signal across the country.”

Nigel did not know why this was such a problem, but Tyler was quite agitated about this demand.

“It doesn’t seem like such a bad thing to me,” Nigel said. “You shouldn’t let yourself get too upset by their request.”

“Not get too upset? I thought if there was one person aboard my boat who could sympathize with me, it would be you,” Tyler said, the disappointment clear in his voice. “Complying to their demand would just be one more way the government is trying to seize total control of my craft. It was bad enough that they took half of the spots on board *and* installed Admiral Nemo to make the final decisions about everything. And now *this*.”

“The government *does* have a way of being sneaky,” Nigel said.

“Which is why I should’ve listened to your earlier warnings about not trusting the government,” Tyler said. “Unfortunately, I had to learn the hard way. But I started to think, should I just ignore what they’re telling me to do? Maybe I could somehow take back control of the boat from the admiral and make my way into deep water *before* the government passengers show up. That would make things much easier.”

“But then they could try finding the boat to destroy us. You

might be underestimating the threat the admiral poses. He and his men have a much better chance of taking over than you. I doubt many of your guests would put themselves in harm's way. Besides, there's still plenty of time before the comet hits. If we somehow subdued Admiral Matthews and his men, the government would still have enough time to dispatch their submarines and order them to blow us out of the water."

Tyler sighed deeply, more of annoyed acceptance than frustration that Nigel disagreed with his plans.

"I hate to admit it, but I know you're right," Tyler said. "Following their demands is the only logical move I have right now."

"It's unfortunate, but I agree," Nigel said, reaffirming Tyler's ultimate decision.

"But by accepting the government's terms, one positive will come from this. And based upon your reaction, I think you'll agree with me on this," Tyler said. "When they demanded we run this testing, I demanded something in return: that they relinquish one of the spots they originally took from me."

"Marc," Nigel said simply, realizing Tyler must have known about this testing for quite some time.

"That's right, Marc can stay and I won't have to do what I originally thought I would," Tyler said.

Nigel suddenly felt a huge weight lifted from his shoulders. Tyler's planned deception against Marc was a great source of concern, but that had changed.

"That is good news," Nigel said, trying to hide his excitement. "When you think about the hard work he's done over the years, I think Marc deserves to be with us in the end."

Tyler nodded.

"Getting rid of him was a bad idea," Tyler said, his head hung a bit low. "I'd been forced into a bad position before. Marc *has been* crucial to the seacraft being built and he knows so much about the operation. I can even use him as my representative in dealing with the government when we have to run our testing."

"I'm sure he'll be thrilled to help in any way possible," Nigel

said. "Just as long as *I don't* have to deal with the government."

Nigel suddenly forgot about BJ Jones and the government's use of the boy as a source to acquire information. In fact, the idea that the boy was a spy now seemed laughable to Nigel, who realized he had to stop overreacting so much. Besides, good things seemed to happen when Nigel stopped worrying.

# CHAPTER SIXTEEN

**JUNE 4, 2020**

**TWO MONTHS, EIGHTEEN DAYS UNTIL IMPACT...**

After being shut out of the command center the day before, Wesley Maddox came to the ultimate conclusion that he was no longer wanted aboard the space station. His conversation with Lily Edwards had been the final clue that he was shut out of the information loop. Lily lied straight to Maddox's face. Lily knew something but was withholding the truth from him.

The former project leader knew he was partially to blame for not being told certain things. He'd made no effort over the last few weeks to assume a leadership position but he still took his recent exclusion as a show of disrespect.

And that disrespect was the final straw. Maddox hadn't done anything to cause trouble, though his desire to leave became nearly uncontrollable. He no longer saw a reason to stop himself from leaving the station early.

Since supply shuttles arrived on a daily basis, Maddox had the opportunity every day to catch a ride home. Of course leaving would have to be cleared by George Marshall. But if his security access to restricted areas had been revoked, Maddox could think of no reason why the former president would force him to stay. He was no longer



needed here—or apparently wanted. It didn't take long to pack up his belongings. Maddox knew he should be ready to leave *before* he made the request of Marshall in case things got heated and he had to leave right away. He hoped it wouldn't come to that, but if there was one thing Maddox learned while leading space construction, it was to always plan for the worst...

Maddox left his room and proceeded down the narrow hallway in his pod, stopping and knocking at the last door he came across. Though they continued to share the same pod from their days of construction, Maddox saw very little of Lily during the 'Inaugural Month.' Besides their brief encounter the previous day, Maddox only ran into his former protégé a handful of times despite the proximity of their rooms. He waited hours for her return from the command center the night before, but she hadn't come back before he finally dozed off. It was no surprise that knocking on her door now also did not receive an answer.

As usual, the corridors were crowded during the day, as most of the passengers had little to do but float around and talk with one another. The atmosphere often brought Maddox back to his college days; the station sometimes felt like the dorms on a rainy Saturday afternoon, no classes and nowhere else to go. When Maddox made his way down the final corridor before the command center, he watched the level of excitement suddenly increase, the chatter from those around him more boisterous than usual. Just as suddenly, many of the passengers began to disappear into their pods. Maddox noticed one particular person making his way down the corridor, quickly saying a few words to each group of people that he passed. Each group quickly ducked into their pods, before the guy moved on to the next group. The messenger was obviously passing along important information and Maddox immediately got the feeling he might get answers to some of his many questions.

"What's happening?" Maddox asked the messenger.

"I just spoke with the computer network guy on board," the messenger said. "The computers are supposedly fixed and there's going to be a broadcast from the command center. President Marshall

has an important message for everyone and then access to the Internet is going to be restored. The announcement is going to start in a few minutes.”

Before Maddox had the opportunity to ask anything else, the messenger floated down the hallway toward the next group of people. Rather than turn around and head back to his room, Maddox decided to finish his trip and get information straight from the source. As he approached the command center, Maddox heard excited chatter from inside pods about the functioning computer screens.

Maddox once again inserted his keycard into the slot just outside the command center. As it did before, the small light above the slot remained red, denying Maddox from the restricted area. But rather than return to his pod, Maddox pounded on the door until someone opened up.

“Wesley, what are you doing here?” Lily asked.

“What’s going on?” Maddox said. “I heard there’s going to be some kind of announcement, but my keycard isn’t working properly.”

Maddox knew Lillian well enough to tell when the girl was embarrassed. When she spoke back to him, she made no eye contact.

“I don’t know anything about that,” Lily said.

Maddox was in no mood to make accusations. Instead, he tried to enter the command center to demand secure passage on the next cargo shuttle that arrived. Unfortunately, he did not get very far.

“I’m not sure that’s the best idea,” Lily answered, blocking the doorway while still hanging her head in shame.

“What do you mean that’s *not a good idea*?” Maddox said, feeling the anger brewing inside of him. “I led construction on this space station and I was invited here to make sure everything went smoothly. Now I can’t do that unless I’m given access to every part of my station.”

“Is there a problem?” a voice said.

Once George Marshall arrived in the entranceway, Lily recoiled into the restricted room to let the two men speak. Maddox felt abandoned by his protégé, yet this piqued his curiosity even more. Whatever was happening inside the command center must be

important for Lily to shirk further confrontation.

“I deserve to know what’s happening,” Maddox said. “As part of the security team aboard the station, it’s my responsibility to have complete knowledge of everything going on.”

“Did you see that your computer is now working?” George Marshall asked.

“That’s what I heard from everyone in the corridors,” Maddox answered.

“I’m about to make a major announcement that you’ll probably want to hear,” Marshall said. “I suggest you return to your pod so you don’t miss anything.”

Maddox shook his head.

“I want to know what it is right now,” Maddox said.

“Wesley, it’s been clear since the day you returned that you did not want to be here,” the former president said bluntly. “You’ve taken very little interest in the ‘Inaugural Month.’ Is my assessment of the situation correct?”

“If we’re being frank with one another, Mr. President, then yes, your assessment is accurate,” Maddox said. “My deal with the government was to build the space station, not oversee its long-term safety. And I don’t think it’s fair that—”

“Wesley, I’m sorry that we tricked you into coming here, but what’s done is done,” Marshall said. “I have something very important to share with everyone on board the station. But you’ve relinquished the opportunity you had to take a prominent leadership role on the station; you’ve also relinquished your privilege of having inside information. So please, return to your pod and stop delaying my announcement. It’s something I’ve waited too long to do.”

As the former president turned and began to close the door, Maddox stuck his hand out and stopped it from closing in his face. He’d come here to say something else, and Maddox was not going to leave until he got everything off of his chest.

“One more thing, *sir*,” he said. “I was wondering about the departure plans for when this ‘Inaugural Month’ ends.”

“My message will address those concerns,” Marshall said.

“I also want your permission to leave the space station early,” Maddox said. “With the steady stream of supply ships arriving, I thought I could catch a ride back to Earth on one of them.”

Marshall sighed. “Once you hear what I have to say, you might not be quite so anxious to leave the space station.”

“I truly doubt that, sir,” Maddox said.

“We’ll see about that,” Marshall said cryptically.

With that, Marshall closed the door. Wesley Maddox turned and headed back toward his room, feeling a mixture of anger and excitement about the possibility of leaving. The corridors were empty this time.

It was amazing how much quicker he could make the trip back to his pod when the corridors weren’t crowded with people.

# CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

In the days following President Brighton's announcement to the world, order had not been compromised as much as the 'Inner Circle' expected. A testament to the resiliency and overall courage of the American public, most of the country banded together during this time of crisis. While an inevitable increase in crime spiked throughout certain areas of America – although nothing near as bad as the crime-rate spike in many other countries across the globe – there were countless instances of normal citizens uniting in an effort to stop criminals from transforming the U.S. into anarchy.

But once the world found out about Comet Clement, James Armour's duties as Defense Secretary took up all his time. He was flooded with requests from ambassadors and leaders from dozens of countries for private meetings to discuss the best ways of combating the approaching comet. And while President Brighton received similar requests, Armour was the person expected to have specific plans of attack. On top of this, Armour was bombarded with questions on a daily basis by an increasingly inquisitive media. Everybody wanted a solution to the comet problem but Armour had nothing to tell them. If he did tell the whole truth – that there was no way to stop the comet – the shaky calmness throughout America would likely crumble.

To make matters worse, Armour's headaches had grown so painful that they were sometimes unbearable. Spending so much time in Washington, D.C. didn't help either. Armour's enemies were always

ready to pounce on any weakness he showed, regardless of the fact that the world was in the middle of a catastrophic crisis. Political power struggles never ended. Armour could imagine politicians fighting for control of the government even as Comet Clement broke through Earth's atmosphere.

The only good part about being in D.C. was Armour's proximity to the White House and Andrew Brighton. The two would be spending the post-comet strike years together. At some point in the next few months, Armour and the current president would disappear into the massive underground bunker in the Russian Ural Mountains. Despite dedication to make sure the space station was built, Armour still felt satisfied that he was making the best decision to stay on Earth.

"James, I didn't know whether I'd ever see you again," said Mae, the elderly White House secretary who'd been on the job since Armour's early days as an astronaut.

Upon being escorted to the Oval Office by one of the Secret Service agents, Armour was surprised to find the usually hectic outer office completely silent, devoid of all activity and life except for Mae.

"What happened to everyone?" Armour asked.

"Everyone left. Most of the office workers relocated to D.C. from different parts of the country for the opportunity to work here. When the president made the comet announcement, they started dropping like flies, heading back home to be with their families."

"What are you still doing here?" Armour asked.

"My husband passed away years ago," she said. "My children have their own kids to worry about at a time like this. I don't need to burden them with a cranky old lady."

Armour smiled, always amused by Mae's candor. Apparently, she also applied that abrasive honesty to herself.

"Besides, this office is my life," she continued. "I'm not going to be frightened away by the threat of some oversized rock. Once we take care of the comet, everyone will feel silly about freaking out and leaving."

"I hope you're right, Mae," Armour said, his amused smile suddenly transforming into a fake one. "Is Andrew in?"

“Of course he is,” she said. “And he’s been waiting for you. Told me to let you in whenever you arrived.”

Armour entered the Oval Office and found President Brighton sitting in his chair, staring out the window at the beautiful sunny day. Even though it was early June, the heat that normally started in D.C. this time of the year held off so far, providing a welcome extension of spring. Armour closed the door harder than usual so Brighton realized that someone entered, but the president did not turn around.

“Sometimes I wish I could move my office out there,” Brighton said without turning around. “This past week has been the best June weather since I arrived in D.C. twelve years ago, but I’ve been stuck indoors the whole time.”

“It has been nice,” Armour said. “Is everything okay, sir?”

Finally, Brighton turned in his chair, making no attempt to hide or wipe away the tears that streamed down his face.

“People have faith in us,” the president said. “They think we’re going to stop the comet and save the world.”

“I know they do, sir,” Armour said. “But the media has made no attempt to hide the real facts: it’s too late for us to do anything that will work. If faith is all that people have left – if faith is the only thing keeping everyone calm and our country in order – then faith is a good thing, regardless of whether it’s misguided.”

“I still haven’t told my wife about Russia or the bunker,” Brighton said. “My son still thinks I’m going to save the day.”

Armour could tell the pressure was finally starting to break Brighton. At least the president was doing a good job appearing confident in the media. Still, Armour’s time was too limited for him to play psychiatrist. He had to keep Brighton focused on important issues, such as their plans for going to Russia.

“Speaking of Russia, Mr. President, have you spoken with President Metachenko recently?” Armour asked.

“Earlier today,” Brighton said. “He says that many parts of Russia are in shambles, that rioting has already begun in Moscow. But he assured me the situation would be under control by the time when we arrive.”

“And when will that be?” Armour asked.

Brighton shook his head. “I don’t know yet, the Russian president and I didn’t discuss that,” the president said. “I didn’t think it would be appropriate for us to consider leaving the country anytime soon, especially since Peter Mansfield is still gathering the list of ‘specials’ for the space station. Once I disappear—once I abandon the country that I was sworn to lead—”

“Don’t be too harsh on yourself, sir,” Armour said. “You’re doing what’s best for your wife and son.”

“I know,” Brighton said, although he still could not look Armour in the eye. “But if we leave America too soon and the country goes to complete shambles when all hope is lost, the ensuing pandemonium might cause trouble for Peter and the remaining station passengers, not to mention the passengers for the seacraft and those going to Russia.”

“The passengers for the two Earth arks will be ready to go any day now, sir,” Armour said. “You have to start worrying about yourself and your family.”

“I know, I will,” President Brighton said. “But my main responsibility for the time being is to the ‘Inner Circle’ and the plans made for the three arks. That’s why I asked you here today, to discuss further plans for the evacuation of Earth. I actually had a question about the space station.”

“Having second thoughts?” Armour wondered. “You can still get a seat on the last shuttle off Earth if you wanted.”

“No, nothing like that,” Brighton said. “Just an idea of how best to use the resources at our command. Maybe another way to give the public more hope and keep the peace a little longer. How many space shuttles will remain docked to the station following the comet strike?”

“Four,” Armour answered. “Each of the Four Corners has a docking station.”

“How many shuttles does NASSA have overall?”

“Two of the newer super space shuttles are already docked aboard the station, as well as the best remaining shuttle of the older version, Exploration,” Armour said. “That leaves us with three



outdated models.”

“Yes, those,” Brighton said. “I have an idea on how to use those.”

The president laid out his plan for Armour over the next twenty minutes. Armour thought Brighton might be losing his mind a bit, but the current president proved he still had plenty of intelligence running through his brain after all.

# CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

George Marshall had the familiar feeling of being in front of a camera, but he was definitely in an unusual setting for giving a speech. For years, the former president put on his best suit, sat behind his large desk in the Oval Office and spoke into a television camera to millions of people across the nation. Now, Marshall wore the standard space station jumpsuit, tried to remain as still as possible (he held on to a small handle to avoid floating away) and was ready to speak into a small computer camera no larger than a soda can. Instead of being watched by millions of viewers across America, approximately 900 space station passengers would be his only audience.

But there was one thing his speech now had in common with his speeches from previous years: it was a big lie. *Hopefully this will be the last lie I ever have to tell about Clement*, he thought. Marshall knew the entire truth would eventually come out to the survivors. While he wished that time was now, he realized everyone aboard the station needed time to digest the overall picture.

Despite his guilty conscience, Marshall had to follow his plan down the homestretch, put his guilty conscience aside and focus on show time. With Sergeant Blatchford in the process of readying his Marines for trouble, the former president took a deep breath and readied himself for the last important speech he'd ever have to give.

"Do you think everyone has made it back to their pods by now?" Marshall asked.

Lily floated beside the small camera across the room, glancing down at her watch.

“It’s been twenty minutes since we sent the messengers,” Lily said. “I think that’s plenty of time.”

Marshall sighed.

“I guess I’ve delayed this long enough,” Marshall said. “You can turn the camera on now.”

Lily flicked the switch on the small camera and Marshall saw his face appear on the computer screen.

“As everyone can see, the computers are finally up and running,” Marshall started. While all of the other important speeches he’d ever given had been carefully written and well prepared, Marshall knew it was best to speak from the heart for this one. “Unfortunately, the first message I have to give you is extremely shocking and impacts everyone on board.

“Just a few hours ago, it was brought to our attention that President Andrew Brighton recently made a speech to the nation. In this speech, he informed the world of a discovery that will surely change the direction of humankind. I wish I could come to you today and pass along good news, but this discovery was not a cure for some deadly disease or the news of a peace accord between warring nations around the globe.”

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Wesley Maddox already found himself impatient. Maddox always thought that one of the president’s worst qualities was an inability to condense simple thoughts. With Maddox on the edge of his seat, anxiously waiting to hear when he could leave the space station, he wondered why the former president couldn’t just get to the point.

*I’m never getting off of this space station,* Maddox realized before Marshall even got to the main point.

“But this news is so overwhelming that it dwarfs any message you could possibly imagine,” Marshall continued, pausing for a dramatic effect after every sentence he spoke.

“Just spit it out already,” Maddox yelled at the computer screen.

“As I speak, a comet nearly three kilometers in size is hurtling through space on a direct collision course with Earth,” Marshall said. “I am just as shocked as I’m sure all of you are, and I wish I had more information to give you at this moment.”

*I bet you do*, Maddox thought. All he could do was shake his head in disgust and loathing for the man he’d once considered his greatest ally.

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“But details are quite scarce at this time, and we’re still waiting for facts and intelligence reports about how this comet strike will impact the world,” George Marshall said. “What I have been assured is that the comet will strike Earth in less than three months and President Brighton will soon gather with leaders from around the world to discuss the best way to deal with it. I’m sure every effort will be made to avoid catastrophe that seems so inevitable.”

Marshall paused for a moment and looked from the small camera to Lily Edwards, whose expression revealed the same emotion that the former president felt: shame. For years, as a member of the ‘Inner Circle,’ Marshall had been surrounded by people who not only accepted the lies they had to tell, but also encouraged them. It was not that men like James Armour and Neil Peterson lacked guilt about what they’d done, but it had all been done with the intentions of doing what was best for humankind.

But now, lying just felt wrong and Marshall could tell that Lily Edwards felt the same way. Now he was lying to people he had lived among, people he had shared intimate conversations with, people he would be continuing human life with.

“Although this news will make many of you want to return home to your families, I regret to inform you that nobody will be leaving this station for at least the next month. I received instructions directly from President Brighton that everybody aboard the space

station is to *stay* aboard the space station until such a time that it's safe to return to Earth. The top scientific and astronomical minds across the globe have a lot to deal with now. While NASSA and the rest of the world haven't forgotten about us, their priorities certainly aren't with us at the moment.

"The best course of action will be re-evaluated by NASSA sometime in the near future. I hope everyone on board understands and remains patient during these troubling times ahead. I urge you to take solace with those people you have made friends with these past few weeks and know that whatever happens will be for the best.

"Before I go, I want to apologize for keeping this secret from you for the past few hours. I felt that speaking through the computer system would be a much better way to learn about the comet than if I simply told a few people and the news spread throughout the station. I thought that gathering everyone on board for this 'Inaugural Month' would be a time for celebration, but now it has turned into a time for survival, one that we must all face together. God bless you all."

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As George Marshall's face disappeared from the computer screen, Maddox found himself feeling satisfied that he'd been correct about something major going on behind the scenes. Despite what the president said in his message, Maddox assumed Marshall had known all along about the comet.

In fact, everything now seemed crystal clear to Maddox. This 'Inaugural Month' was never meant to be a celebration of the station's completion; it was meant to trick a thousand people into leaving their families on Earth to continue human life. That was why there was no thought of exit procedures. That was why the large majority of those passengers on board were young and strong. That was why the Internet and computers on the station had not been working.

*I wonder if the comet announcement on Earth was just made today,* Maddox wondered.

Maddox wondered how long Lily Edwards had known. Her

involvement proved that Maddox had nobody he could trust on board. Lily's deception was certainly a disappointment, but Maddox could not waste his time thinking about that.

For now, he had to figure out the best way to put this information to good use. He doubted whether any other passenger on board had the kind of knowledge that he did, which put Maddox in a quandary.

*Do I tell everyone else and let Marshall get what he deserves?*  
Maddox wondered. *Or do I go to him first and use my knowledge to squeeze every bit of information from him that I can?*

# CHAPTER NINETEEN

Admiral Matthews spent most of his time inside the seacraft's control room located just above the large lobby. Two of his men were always in the room with him, with the third on duty on the bottom level of the craft. This was the same schedule his men would adhere to during the years after the comet strike.

Since the seacraft relied so heavily on computers, it was unlikely the admiral would ever need two people in the control room with him if a crisis happened. According to Tyler Ainsworth, the control systems were designed to keep the craft out of trouble. But Matthews always believed in maximizing safety, especially since he was from the old school and could barely turn on a computer screen.

Despite the seacraft still being anchored to the ocean floor, Admiral Matthews kept his men running simulations in the time they spent waiting to cast off for deep water. But simulations and drills only took up a few hours each day, leaving Matthews and his men with countless hours of nothing to do. Monotony became so bad that Matthews sometimes left the control room to mingle with the 'guests' in the lobby (though he really did this to worry Tyler, who could not stop from looking nervous whenever Matthews was around).

The elevator doors opened and the admiral sighed when he saw who stood there. Matthews had completely forgotten Tyler Ainsworth had a key to the elevator.

"Admiral, I was wondering if I could have a word with you,"

Tyler said as he stepped into the control room.

Not a very large area, the control room felt even smaller with so much machinery squeezed in. Matthews had always been old-fashioned, a strong doubter of most new kinds of technology. That was why he'd been so surprised that he admired the strange design of this control room. The captain's chair (obviously selected by a wealthy civilian rather than a penny-pinching Naval engineer) sat on a large platform in the middle of the room. Multiple monitors lined the platform, giving the captain a 360-degree view of the boat's exterior, the feed coming from dozens of cameras and spotlights mounted on the craft's hull.

The only other piece of furniture on the platform was a small table, which Tyler headed straight toward. Admiral Matthews saw what appeared to be a nautical chart in Tyler's hand.

"We're a bit busy right now," the admiral said. Although this was the furthest thing from the truth, the admiral could not allow Tyler to barge into his command room and think that he would drop whatever he was doing. The problem with rich, spoiled 'guests' was that Tyler catered to their every need, a mistake the admiral wasn't going to make with Tyler.

"I'm sorry, Admiral Matthews. I should've given you more warning about my arrival," Tyler said. "I shouldn't have just interrupted what you were doing. But if you could spare me just a few minutes, I would really appreciate it, sir."

Despite Matthews's longstanding dislike of Tyler Ainsworth, the admiral had to admit the man had been very respectful recently. Because of this, the admiral granted Tyler's request.

"Okay, a few minutes," Matthews said.

Tyler glanced at the other men in the room and then back to Matthews.

"I was hoping we could speak in private," Tyler said. "If that would be okay with you, sir."

Matthews merely nodded. His two men immediately stood and walked to the elevator.

"Wait in the lobby downstairs until I'm done," Admiral



Matthews ordered his men. The admiral could tell that this order worried Tyler, who did not like anybody mixing with his rich 'guests.' But if Tyler wanted to play hardball, Matthews knew the right pitch to throw for a strikeout. "Make sure everyone is behaving down there."

Once the elevator doors closed, Tyler unrolled the chart and laid it across the small table on the captain's platform. The admiral instantly recognized the chart of the Pacific Ocean, most notably the western seaboard of the United States. There were multiple dots along the seaboard, ranging nearly two hundred miles from the coast of Washington, with lines connecting them together.

"As you know from that little episode you witnessed the other day, my guests have become quite bored sitting around," Tyler said. "I decided it would be best for morale if we took the seacraft out to the ocean for a short trip before the other passengers arrive."

"You don't even know when the other passengers will arrive," Matthews said. "Besides, I've already informed you we won't be going anywhere until the boat is full. What makes you think I've changed my mind?"

"Because I've already taken the liberty of plotting out a detailed course," Tyler said. "As you can see, I've done my homework when it comes to reading and mapping out these charts. The course I've planned will bring us to deep water the entire time to avoid any chance for an accident."

Glancing quickly over the chart, Admiral Matthews saw that Ainsworth plotted a safe course. But that still did not change the admiral's mind.

"This isn't the best idea for the seacraft right now," Matthews said.

"But it would be good for the water pressure engines to have another short trip before the main journey," Tyler added.

"Don't make me have to repeat myself," Matthews warned. "I have to be ready to leave this craft at any moment, very likely sooner than later. So that makes your trip out of the question."

"Leave?" Ainsworth asked. "Where are you going? Why wasn't I informed you'd be leaving?"

The admiral realized he probably said too much and immediately became annoyed.

“You weren’t told because I didn’t think it necessary to keep you fully apprised of my every movement,” Matthews said.

“Don’t bother me for specifics because I don’t plan on giving them to you.”

Now it was Tyler’s turn to become annoyed.

“If you and I are going to have a positive working relationship, you’d better think about being more courteous and forthcoming with information regarding my boat,” Tyler said.

“When the government gathers the people that they have assigned to be on this seacraft, I will go to meet them and bring them here personally,” Matthews said, attempting to offer any bit of information as an olive branch. “Therefore, *I must be by land* so that I can leave the seacraft at a moment’s notice.”

“But – ”

“Listen, you’ve been lucky to have the chance of surviving this comet strike but my patience for your *ideas* is wearing thin,” the admiral yelled, finally losing his cool.

“Let’s get something straight. I wasn’t *given the chance* to survive, I made that chance for myself,” Tyler said. “Unlike you, who was lucky enough to be given a chance to live because of *my boat*.”

“Your boat?” Matthews asked. “Don’t forget that the U.S. government paid for most of this thing. You’re starting to make me wish that they completely took it away from you. But I don’t have time to deal with this any more. If hearing an apology will make you feel better, then fine. I’m sorry, but your guests will have to deal with their boredom a little longer. Now please, leave before I’m forced to take away your key to the elevator.”

In a fit of anger, Tyler snatched his nautical map from off the small table, crumpled it up and threw it on the floor. Rather than sit by and watch the temper tantrum, Admiral Matthews turned his chair around and watched the monitors, even though the boat’s floodlights were not even on. Matthews heard the ping of the elevator doors opening and the heavy stomp of Tyler’s feet, but he would never see

the satisfied smile on Tyler's face.

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Despite both men sometimes acting civilly to one another, Tyler hated the admiral as much as Matthews hated him. They were from totally different worlds, worlds that neither could imagine or think to understand.

One of the things Tyler hated so much about Matthews was that the old man refused to listen to reason, refused to be talked into *anything*. Over the past week, the admiral refused to give Tyler any information in any way deemed 'secret.' Unfortunately for Tyler, that was just about everything he wanted to know. But rather than sit around and become angrier at the admiral's stubbornness, Tyler did the one thing his father always tried teaching him was most important in the business world: he learned his opponent's weakness and figured out the best way to adapt to it. The first time Tyler asked the admiral when the government passengers would arrive, Matthews told him nothing, despite Tyler's polite approach.

But now that he picked a fight and got the admiral riled up, Matthews let slip that those passengers would come any day now. With this knowledge in hand, Tyler began to lay further groundwork for his other plans. When the elevator stopped at the lobby, Tyler quickly turned his smile back into a grimace as the doors opened. Standing close by were Matthews's two military crewmembers. As the men passed each other, Tyler was sure they saw him looking upset.

# CHAPTER TWENTY

**JUNE 5, 2020**

**TWO MONTHS, SEVENTEEN DAYS UNTIL IMPACT...**

For the six days since President Brighton announced Comet Clement would soon smash into Earth, Colin McKay and John Fare had not ventured beyond the Fare mansion's long driveway. For the first time since he'd lived in the huge house, John closed the entrance gates to their large property, heeding the advice of newscasters on TV. John and Colin had not heard of any violence around their area, but the news continued to report that crime and looting were increasing across the country.

Besides being housebound at all times, the biggest difference in their lives was no longer attending school. It was only a few months since they enrolled in public school and John was glad he could stop going. Public school wasn't any worse than the Zwier Academy, but it was a hassle that was suddenly gone. It freed up time for him to do other things, like sit around, smoke pot and watch continuing coverage of the "Comet Crisis" story on TV.

"We're starting to run low on food," Colin said as he entered the smoky living room. "You need to give it a break on that stuff. It's killing your brain cells a lot quicker than you think."

John laughed at the irony of the situation.

"I'm not going to need my brain cells after August 22," John said.

“Fine,” Colin said, avoiding the same ‘just say no’ speech he’d already given John a hundred times. “Then that stuff is killing our food supply. The way you get the munchies, we’ll be out of everything by the end of the week.”

“So what?” John said. “I got an endless supply of cash on my debit card. We can run to the store when we need to.”

“Hello? Haven’t you been listening to what they’re saying?” Colin asked. “It’s not safe to leave the house. And who knows if the banks are still running as usual, or the food stores for that matter.”

“First you complain about being cooped up inside all day, now you complain because we can’t go anywhere. You’re impossible to please,” John joked. “News flash: the end of the world is coming, what does it matter anyway?”

Colin munched on a granola bar and drank water he’d taken from the tap. He sat down on a chair nearby and stared at the television, though he was bored from watching the *same story over and over*. The amount of fresh news about the comet was minimal and mostly consisted of some foreign leader making a statement stressing the importance of remaining calm. The more worldwide governments stressed this, the less confidence the public had in the chances of a positive outcome to this situation.

*Don’t think like that, Colin reminded himself. Stay positive. With all the incredible technology humankind has invented in recent years, it should be no problem for scientists to develop a plan to avoid disaster.*

“I wish the president had the guts to come out and tell the world the truth,” John said.

“And what truth is that?”

“This comet is going to hit,” John said. “We’re all as good as dead.”

“Come on, man. You can’t think like that,” Colin said. “You have to hope something good will come of this. Humankind is too intelligent to let Comet Clement end what billions of men and women created over thousands of years.”

John attempted to stifle a chuckle at his friend’s naivete.

“If there’s one thing that will destroy the human race, it *will be*

Mother Nature,” John said. “Is a comet considered part of Mother Nature? I mean, it comes from space, so I don’t know if that’s especially nature, you know what I mean?”

“I guess it is,” Colin said.

“Anyway, the dinosaurs roamed Earth for millions of years, thousands of times longer than humans have,” John said. “When a comet came along, they were certainly no match.”

“But dinosaurs didn’t create technology,” Colin said. “Dinosaurs didn’t create computers and cars and TV. Humankind did, humankind used its God-given intelligence to better the world. We are smart, and that is why I can only hope the governments will do something to stop Clement.”

“The thought of dying doesn’t even bother me,” John said. “At least I’ll get to see my mom sooner than I expected...”

It was rare that John mentioned his mother. When he spoke of her before, it was usually to complain about his father not caring that she’d died. Now that John mentioned her with sadness, Colin felt awkward and did not know how to respond.

“All I know is that I want to live,” Colin said. “So if this comet is going to strike, we should start doing something to plan for it.”

The sadness momentarily etched on John’s face was suddenly gone, replaced by the familiar omnipotent smirk.

“Like what? Build a bomb shelter in the backyard?” John asked sarcastically.

“Why not?” Colin asked. “Anything is better than sitting around here, listening to the newscasters repeat the same stories.”

“Maybe we can drain the water and build a roof over the pool,” John said. “All we’d need would be a couple of flashlights, a thermos of water and a few boxes of granola bars. ”

“I’m not joking around,” Colin said. “For years I lived under terror of my father. Now that I’m finally away from him, I don’t want to sit around and wait for some stupid comet. There has to be some way we can survive this thing.”

John suddenly sat up straight, his normally condescending smile erased from his face.

"I've been selfish," he said.

"In what way?" Colin asked.

"Since I've heard about the comet, I haven't really cared that I'd be dead in a few months," John said. "At least I didn't care once you showed up. With my mom dead and my dad gone, it was a relief to know I wasn't going to spend these last few months alone, to die alone when the comet strikes."

Colin refused to give up hope but understood where his friend was coming from. He was alone in the world too, and couldn't imagine what he would've done if John wasn't there for him.

"You're not hitting on me or anything, are you?" Colin asked with a wry smile.

"Calm down there, big boy," John said. "You know full well I'm saving myself for Heather Sanders. Believe me, if I had the choice, I'd be spending these final few months with her instead of you."

"I see what twelve years of friendship gets you," Colin joked. "A backseat to a bimbo from *Beach Patrol*."

"Come on, man, you have to keep up with the times," John said. "Heather left that show years ago. She's a serious actress now. But you've been a good friend to me for years and now I'm being selfish when it counts the most."

"We don't have to start saying our goodbyes just yet," Colin said. "If anyone should feel selfish, it's me. You're being nice enough to let me crash at your house, you're feeding me, you're giving me the chance to get away from my father. I should be thanking you."

Without speaking another word, John stood up from the couch and walked out of the living room, heading toward the staircase.

"Where are you going?" Colin called after him.

"I'm just going to cut through the chatter," John said. "I have to get something real quick. I think it will make much more sense to you."

When John came back down the stairs a few minutes later, he carried a manila envelope, the same envelope Colin saw on the coffee table the night of the comet announcement.

"You going to tell me what that is?" he asked his friend.

John did not answer. Instead, he sat down on the couch and looked Colin in the eye. He tossed the envelope onto the coffee table in front of Colin and began to explain.

“The night my father left, I had the feeling something strange was going on,” John explained. “When he said goodbye, he gave me that envelope with instructions to wait to open it until I saw some kind of major news on TV. At the time, I thought he was in some kind of trouble, that I was going to see some kind of scandal in the business world. But apparently, I was looking out for the wrong kind of major news.”

Colin picked up the envelope, surprised to find it very light. The top of the envelope had been torn off. Although he could see a piece of paper inside, Colin felt hesitant to rifle through the contents, looking to John for permission.

“I didn’t get it just for you to stare at the envelope,” his friend told him. “Read it.”

Colin removed the single handwritten piece of paper and small silver envelope. John instructed him to read the letter first:

*Dear John,*

*If you followed my instructions before opening this, you must know about the comet by now. I can imagine your frustration and anger about being left to endure these terrible times alone. For that, I apologize with all my heart. I can’t imagine how trying these times are for the world and how nervous you must be, but I pray that you remain safe.*

*I’m sure you’re wondering how I found out about the comet. A few months ago, I received a call from my boss, Bernard Jones, who told me to meet him in north Washington for a special meeting. He introduced me to a man named Tyler Ainsworth, who owned some sort of shipbuilding business. It was at this meeting I first heard the shocking news about Comet Clement (a name that I’m sure you’re quite familiar with by now).*

*According to Mr. Ainsworth, the government has known about the comet and its path to Earth for almost a dozen years. I don’t know how Ainsworth was associated with the government, or how he received his*



information, but he convinced my boss of its truth, so that's all I needed. As expected, I was shocked to hear the news, but it wasn't long before Mr. Ainsworth gave me hope.

He built a massive underwater seacraft and was selling spots on board to individuals he deemed worthy to survive the comet impact. Ainsworth gave me a short list of people who already purchased their spots (wealthy businessmen, famous Hollywood people, professional athletes, among others). Fortunately for me, Ainsworth had one spot still remaining that he offered to me for the sum of five million dollars.

Once I heard this sales pitch, I was skeptical. I thought maybe this wasn't real, but I knew Bernard Jones was not the type of man to be fooled by a con. Anyway, I bought the ticket (which was the final seat aboard the craft, despite my pleas to buy one more).

Included in this envelope is the silver ticket that will gain your entrance to this submarine. I do not know when it will be leaving, but I imagine it will be soon after President Brighton makes his announcement to the world. So please, if you are reading this after the news has hit the airwaves, please follow the directions on the back of this letter to the motel in Washington. It should be a long drive, but if you leave right away, I hope you'll have enough time before it departs. Ask for either Mr. Ainsworth or Mr. Jones when you arrive and show them this ticket; I informed them both of my intentions of giving the ticket to you, so you shouldn't have a problem getting on board.

By now, I should be in the Caribbean—though I won't tell you the exact island in case you get the crazy notion to come find me. Your mother and I vacationed down here many times. One of the first dreams we had soon after getting married was to one day buy a small villa and retire down here. I wish she could be here with me now, but there's no doubt in my mind that I'll soon be with her.

I'm sorry that I kept this a secret from you. Mr. Jones stressed the importance of keeping quiet, even to you. I love you, son, and getting the chance to be your father was an opportunity I regret messing up. I hope that giving you this chance to survive will somehow make you think better of me in the future and prove how you and your mother were always the most important to me. Please be careful and good luck, I know you're a

*fighter and that you will survive. I love you.*

*Your father*

After reading the letter, Colin opened the silver envelope and extracted an invitation that contained nothing but an illustration of waves. On the back of the invitation were handwritten directions for John to travel north on the interstate highway leading all the way to Washington. At first Colin was shocked to read this, but then he realized what it meant. His friend was going to be saved from the comet.

“This is incredible,” Colin said. “Why didn’t you tell me earlier?”

John shrugged, as if this news was nothing. But Colin recalled part of the letter.

“What are you still doing here? Your dad’s letter told you to leave right away,” Colin said, suddenly afraid that his friend missed the boat.

“I don’t want to go,” John said simply.

“What are you talking about?” Colin asked. “You *have* to go, you owe it to your dad. More importantly, you owe it to yourself.”

“I don’t want to go,” John repeated, “because I don’t especially want to survive the comet strike. But you do want to live, so that’s why you’re going to take the ticket, leave now and hope to God that you get there before the submarine leaves.”

Colin glanced down at the ticket and then back at his friend. He shook his head before the words even came to mind.

“I won’t take this,” Colin said. “It’s your ticket and your chance to live, not mine.”

A knowing smile appeared on John’s face.

“Oh, I think you *will* take it,” he said.

Before Colin could respond, he spotted something else in his best friend’s hand: a gun.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The mood aboard the space station was eerily reminiscent of the mood across America after President Brighton's speech. Most of the passengers aboard the station were in shock, with many more curious about the comet. Marshall was relieved that nobody figured out the 'Inaugural Month' conspiracy, which helped keep order aboard the station. Still, the former president had little doubt that somebody would discover the truth in the near future. To plan for such an inevitability, Marshall consulted with Sergeant Blatchford. The Marine set up a schedule for all other Marines to constantly be on patrol in different parts of the station's corridors.

Immediately following his speech, Marshall had the Internet link with the rest of the world reconnected, allowing the passengers to do as much research about the comet as possible. Since Marshall waited to make his announcement nearly five days after Brighton had made his, he immediately sent a station-wide e-mail giving an explanation as to why there was such a delay.

*For the past ten days, the communication link with ground control has been severed, Marshall wrote. I informed nobody on board about this problem because the rest of the 'Inaugural Month' was running smoothly. Needless to say, my joy in re-establishing communication with Earth was short-lived, when I was informed of the president's devastating news.*

Marshall worked hard to keep the passengers upbeat and the mood positive. While many people came to him with questions or

concerns, Marshall always played naïve. He explained to anyone who'd listen that he was just as clueless about the situation as the rest of them.

"My fiancée is freaking out, sir," said one of the first passengers who found Marshall in the corridors. Marshall recognized the young man as Patrick O'Brien, one of the randomly selected passengers. "I need to get off of the station and get to her, Mr. President. Please, I need your help."

"You're engaged?" Marshall asked. When making the passenger list, Peter Mansfield was ordered to avoid adding anyone with strong family ties, who was married or who was soon to be married. By doing so, Marshall hoped to avoid this kind of situation.

"Yes, sir," the young man said proudly, though the worry was still clear in his voice. "I asked her to marry me the day before I left. Anyway, I need to get back to Earth to make sure she's safe."

"As I told the rest of the passengers, NASSA is not allowing anyone to leave the station right now," Marshall said, blaming the space agency for a rule that was his own.

Dealing with a situation like this had been inevitable, but it still broke Marshall's heart to see worry and concern on the young man's face. It was even worse knowing that Pat O'Brien would never see his fiancée again. Still, he couldn't make exceptions for anyone, despite emotional circumstances.

"But Mr. President, I see supply ships still coming and going," O'Brien persisted. "Why can't I just hop aboard one and go back to Earth?"

"This isn't my decision," Marshall lied. "I don't control the supply shuttles. If we've been told that nobody is to leave the station, then that order has come directly from the President of the United States. Believe me, the first thing I wanted to do was return to Earth so I could help out, in any possible way. But I was told that Andrew Brighton did not want anyone returning from the space station just yet. He wants to keep the minds of all our space experts and workers focused solely on stopping the comet."

The young man reacted with bitter disappointment, an emotion

better for the morale of the station than anger.

“I’m just worried about her, sir,” he said. “She’s the most important thing in my life, and if this comet does hit Earth, I want to be with her when the end comes.”

“The best thing you can do is write to her and tell her to remain calm,” Marshall said. “Make sure she knows that you are okay and that we are doing everything possible to stop the comet. If the worst possible scenario with Clement does become unavoidable, I will see what I can do to help out.”

O’Brien nodded, though both knew Marshall’s promise was nothing but empty words. The young man left dejected, but Marshall was glad O’Brien kept his cool. Marshall hoped the young man would not cause too much of a scene even when it became clear that the comet strike was unavoidable. But that was still too far in the future to worry about, especially since there was a growing line of passengers waiting to complain to Marshall.

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Wesley Maddox was surprised to find most passengers taking the news of Comet Clement so well. Even the scientists did not respond with the sort of frightened urgency Maddox felt. In fact, many of the people seemed relieved to be on board the space station. Everyone was worried, but nobody else reached the same conclusion Maddox had: the ‘Inaugural Month’ was a sham, a deception invented by George Marshall to trick a thousand people into being humankind’s backup plan to continue life. Since the hoax seemed so obvious to him, Maddox wondered how nobody else put the pieces together yet.

Unless nobody wanted to *admit* that they knew...

Maddox did not appreciate being lied to. He would have to approach Marshall with the information he had, but without gauging the feelings of the other passengers, he did not know how accusatory a tone he should take. Maddox had no plans of staging a riot and taking command of the station, but it would be nice to establish himself in some sort of position of power, one where he could make decisions

and help others who did not want to sit back and be told how their lives would proceed.

When Maddox finally left his room after Marshall's announcement, he found the crowded corridors mostly deserted, as most of the station's passengers were doubtlessly still in their pods, scanning the Internet for news about the comet. As a matter of fact, Maddox saw only one other person in the entire hallway, a young man approaching from the opposite direction. As he got closer, Maddox recognized him as one of the 'randoms.' The young man seemed friendly before (Maddox remembered the wide grin on the young man's face when speaking about his fiancée), but now looked despondent, his head hanging low as he appeared to wander aimlessly about.

"Are you okay?" Maddox asked.

The young man stopped and slowly turned toward Maddox. Snapped out of a momentary daze, the depressed expression on the young man's face turned to one of recognition when he realized who was talking to him.

"Mr. Maddox, I'm sorry. I didn't even see you coming," the young man muttered.

"Please, call me Wesley," Maddox said. "I know we've spoken before but I don't think I caught your name."

"Pat," the young man said. "Patrick O'Brien."

"Well, Pat, I saw that you didn't seem to be noticing much of anything," Maddox said. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah, everything is fine," O'Brien said. He quickly changed his mind. "Actually, no. Nothing is okay at all."

"Maybe there's something I can do to help out."

"I doubt it," O'Brien said. "Not unless you can find me a ride back to Earth."

"I wish I could help with that one," Maddox said.

"You see, it's just that I have people to get back to," O'Brien said. "I just recently got engaged..."

"Right before you left to come here," Maddox said. "I remember you saying that."

“That’s right,” O’Brien said, surprised that Maddox had remembered. “And my fiancée is really worried. She must’ve thought I’ve been ignoring her since I came aboard the space station. Anyway, I’ve finally been able to read her e-mails and the world doesn’t sound very safe. She told me that our neighbor’s house was already vandalized and that one of her friends has completely disappeared. Nobody knows if she ran away or was kidnapped or what. And now I’m imprisoned up here when she needs me the most and I feel like I’m abandoning the biggest responsibility of my life.”

“I wish I could help you, I really do. Actually, I wish I could sit next to you on the next ride back to Earth,” Maddox said. “Have you had the chance to talk to George Marshall about this? He’s the only person on board that might be able to help.”

“I just spoke to him about an hour ago,” the young man said, turning angrier. “I voiced my concerns, but needless to say, he wasn’t able to help. Or at least that’s the story he told me.”

“You don’t believe him?” Maddox asked, trying to hide his satisfaction that someone else distrusted the former president.

“I’m not sure *what* to believe,” O’Brien said, hesitant to say anything negative about Marshall. The young man must’ve assumed that Maddox was close with the former president.

“This is a time full of questions,” Maddox said, “and rightly so. It’s logical to be wary of different people, especially those who have nothing to gain by telling you the complete truth.”

“*You* think President Marshall might be lying?” O’Brien asked.

“I don’t know if I would use the word lying,” Maddox said, even though that was *exactly* what he thought. “But I do think there are strange things happening, too many flukes that couldn’t possibly be coincidental.”

“Like what?” O’Brien asked.

Maddox glanced down both ends of the corridor to make sure nobody else was in hearing range.

“Can I trust you?” Maddox asked. “Because what I’m about to say...well...I’m not sure if I should be pointing these things out to anyone. And I *certainly* don’t want rumors going around that I’m

spouting insane conspiracy theories.”

“Of course,” O’Brien said. “You’re the only person in charge around here who’s spoken to me honestly.”

O’Brien seemed to take the cue that he could say whatever he was thinking.

“The U.S. government decided that they wanted to build a space station,” Maddox started. “Completing this thing took years of planning and construction, and it *just so happens* that it was finished less than six months before the comet is supposed to strike?”

O’Brien shrugged his shoulders.

“That could’ve been good timing,” the young man said. “Besides, you had as much to do with that happening as the government.”

“Fair point, I also considered good timing. But *McNalley & Jones’s* contract with the government was loaded with incentives to finish construction ahead of schedule,” Maddox said. “How about this? The man responsible for having the station built—”

“You?” O’Brien asked.

“Even before me, the man who conceived the entire idea of a space station and then sold it to the American public,” Maddox said, almost seeing the light bulb turn on in O’Brien’s head.

“President Marshall,” Patrick said.

“Precisely. A man with no space background and who’s been out of office for several years just *happens* to be on the space station at the exact time the announcement is made about an impending comet strike?” Maddox asked.

“Marshall is here for the ‘Inaugural Month.’ Obviously the space station being completed was a big deal. NASSA wanted to celebrate in as grand a fashion as possible. Short of bringing the current president here, they decided to bring the last one, the one most responsible for the existence of this station,” O’Brien countered.

“Again, both of these circumstances could still fall under the category of coincidental,” Maddox said. “But while we’re on the subject of the station’s passengers, did you happen to notice a characteristic that just about everyone on board—except for Marshall



and the former First Lady—has in common?”

O’Brien thought for a moment, but realized the answer was an easy one. In fact, this was something O’Brien and many of the others noticed before, but didn’t give much thought.

“Their age,” O’Brien said. “Everyone is young, probably in their mid-to late-twenties. But maybe the government wanted to send the strongest possible people to space because of the harsh environment.”

“You might think that, but the average age of American astronauts since the beginning of the space program is nearly forty,” Maddox said. “Therefore, a younger age for merely *going* to space doesn’t seem to be much of a factor. Why else would they want younger people going to space? Maybe for a *much longer* stay?”

“Because they don’t want us to return to Earth,” O’Brien said.

Maddox and O’Brien spoke for nearly an hour, with the former project leader mentioning other ‘mysterious’ things he’d noticed. The strange timing of the computer failure (just around the time of President Brighton’s speech); the daily arrival of supply shuttles; Maddox even explained the peculiar way that Lillian Edwards treated him recently. It didn’t take long for O’Brien to understand why Maddox was skeptical about everything that had to do with this ‘Inaugural Month.’ O’Brien grew angrier by the minute.

“I can’t believe this is happening,” he said, coming to the realization that he wasn’t likely to see the love of his life again. A mixture of rage and grief flooded O’Brien. But before he could say anything else, Maddox motioned to two people approaching from down the corridor.

“Just remain calm,” Maddox said. “Don’t let on that you’re upset or that you know anything.”

As the two came closer, Maddox recognized military personnel. The two Marines looked suspiciously at Maddox and O’Brien, watching them in a way that Maddox had never noticed before.

“Is everything okay here, fellas?” one of the Marines asked, as if Maddox and O’Brien were two prisoners standing outside of their cells.

“Yeah, everything is fine,” Maddox answered, resisting the

temptation to give the Marine a sharp response. “We’re just talking about the comet, same as everyone else I’m sure.”

The Marines nodded and continued down the hallway, but not before glancing back at O’Brien and Maddox a few more times.

“See, those two must be on patrol. Since when has using the corridors been regulated?” Maddox asked once they disappeared in the distance.

But before O’Brien could answer, they saw yet another person approaching them.

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The Marine pointed down the corridor and Marshall took off in that direction. When he turned the corner, Marshall saw Maddox and another man talking. As he approached, Marshall noticed that they suddenly stopped talking. He recognized the other person as Patrick O’Brien, the same young man who begged the former president an hour earlier for passage off the space station.

Marshall could not hear what Maddox said to O’Brien. The young man looked suspiciously—*maybe even conspiratorially*, Marshall thought—at the former president before he turned and floated down the corridor. When O’Brien left Marshall earlier, he seemed disappointed. But that look suddenly changed to one of anger, and Marshall could not help but feel that Wesley Maddox was the reason for this sudden change. The former president was tempted to go after O’Brien and find out what Maddox said, but he went straight to the source of the problem instead.

“Wesley, how are you?” Marshall asked.

“Not so great, Mr. President,” Maddox answered. “I’m finding out that some people are upset about being on board, almost as upset as I am.”

“Yes, these are troubling times indeed,” Marshall said. “I can understand why everyone’s nerves are affected by the stress of the situation. But unfortunately, we must remain on the space station until further notice. Is that what you and Patrick were discussing?”

“He’s worried about his fiancée,” Maddox said. “He feels like he is a prisoner on board the space station, that his place should be down on Earth with his future wife. If there is a future...”

“I wouldn’t worry about that,” Marshall said. “Everything possible is being done to prevent this catastrophe.”

“With all due respect sir, you don’t have to lie to me the way you’ve been to everyone else,” Maddox said. “I’ve done the research. If this comet is on a direct path with Earth, it is too late to stop it. In reality, the only thing that can be done is to protect as many people as possible so humankind can continue. And I think the best possible place to protect these people would be somewhere off the planet, let’s say somewhere like a space station.”

The former president had always been nervous that somebody would figure out what he’d done. But now that Maddox figured it out, Marshall was relieved that someone had discovered the truth.

“Then I guess everyone should feel lucky to be up here instead of down there,” George Marshall said, dropping the friendly façade.

“I imagine most would feel lucky,” Maddox said. “But some might feel duped about being lured here, regardless of good intentions. I would venture to guess there are others like Patrick O’Brien, people who value their loved ones more than their own lives, people desperate to return to Earth to be with their families when the comet strikes.”

“I should allow these people to leave? You think I should send Pat O’Brien back to Earth?” Marshall asked. “In essence, grant him a death wish by shipping him off the space station?”

“If there really is no chance for the world to be saved, everyone deserves the truth so they can say proper goodbyes without having false hope.”

“I didn’t know he had a fiancée. We made sure to select people who were unattached.”

“You did a pretty bad job at that,” Maddox said. “But I guess playing God isn’t a job for men.”

“We did what was best for humanity,” Marshall said angrily. He’d always known the ‘Inner Circle’ was playing God, but he hated to

think of it that way. Planning for the comet strike was not a task he wanted, not a task he accepted in order to feel powerful. It was something that fell into his lap.

“I think *humanity* should’ve chosen what was best for them,” Maddox fired back. “Not a single person.”

“You have no idea what this has been like,” Marshall said, finally raising his voice. He forced himself to take a deep breath and immediately looked around, worried that others might overhear. Luckily, they were still alone. “I don’t want to argue with you. We did what we did and now we can only hope for the best. So now what happens?”

“What do you mean?” Maddox asked.

“How do you plan to use the information you have?” Marshall asked. “Spread it around the station and risk a riot?”

“I don’t know,” Maddox answered truthfully. “I guess we’ll have to wait and see what happens.”

With that, Maddox returned to his pod and left the former president floating alone in the corridor.

# CHAPTER

# TWENTY-TWO

“Where did you get that?” Colin asked.

John looked ridiculous holding the gun, as non-threatening as a person could look while holding a deadly weapon. Despite the gun-toting video games John played over the years, Colin doubted his friend had ever held a real gun before.

“It’s my dad’s. He keeps a bunch of them in the safe of his bedroom closet,” John answered. “But that doesn’t matter. You’re going to take that ticket and you’re going to drive to Washington and get aboard the sub.”

Despite John’s attempt to sound forceful, he could not pull it off, even when he raised the gun.

“Or what?” Colin asked, barely able to keep the smile off his face. “You’re going to shoot me? We both know that’s not going to happen. It would be hard for me to use the ticket if I’m dead.”

John’s attempt at assertiveness obviously failed, but a serious expression came across his face. Colin rarely saw his best friend look like this and his stomach suddenly twisted for what he knew his friend would do next.

“But it would be easier for you to go if *I* was dead,” John said, raising the gun at his own head.

“Wait!” Colin yelled. “What are you doing?”

“What I have to do to make sure you save yourself,” John said. “I figured you would force me to do this, but I hoped you would go without me having to blow my brains out in front of you.”

Colin believed that his friend would not hesitate to take the

most extreme measure in order to get what he wanted.

“But why won’t *you* just use the ticket?” Colin asked. “Your dad bought it for you, not me.”

John cocked the gun’s hammer and Colin could see his friend’s finger beginning to lightly squeeze the trigger.

“I already explained myself,” John said. “I don’t want to live. You do. There’s no other person in the world that deserves this ticket more than you. Now don’t make me repeat myself. Every second we stand here is one more second you might be missing the boat. Don’t force me to get you moving quicker.”

“How am I going to get there?” Colin asked. “Washington isn’t a quick stroll up the road.”

“Drive, I have plenty of cars to choose from,” John said. “If you ask nicely, I might let you borrow one.”

“But I don’t have insurance,” Colin said. “What happens if I get into an accident?”

John lowered the gun and began to laugh.

“Are you serious? A killer comet is coming to destroy Earth and you have the chance to be saved, but you’re worried about car insurance?” John asked.

He put the gun back to his head and pulled the trigger.

“No!” Colin yelled.

*CLICK*

Colin felt a wave of nausea pass over him but was quickly replaced by intense anger.

“You think that’s funny?” Colin yelled. “I almost had a heart attack and you’re messing around with an empty gun?”

John aimed the gun toward the kitchen and pulled the trigger. This time, there was no empty click. A deafening *bang* echoed throughout the house, nearly causing both young men to nearly jump out of their shoes. That noise was soon followed by shattering glass. John looked in the direction of the gun shot and smiled, though that smile was short-lived.

“Looks like we’re going to need a new kitchen window,” John said. He put the gun against his head again. “Believe me, the first

chamber was the only empty one.”

“But I’m not you,” Colin pleaded. “If this submarine is such a secret and only rich people like your father could buy spots on board, what will they think when some poor kid suddenly shows up? They’ll never let me aboard and then this ticket will have gone to waste.”

“You aren’t the craftiest person, that’s for sure,” John said. “Nobody on that submarine knows who I am. Just pretend you’re me.”

“What about your dad’s boss?” Colin asked. “Wasn’t he the one who got your dad the spot? He’ll know who you are.”

“Have you ever heard of Bernard Jones?” John asked.

“The name sounds familiar,” Colin said.

“He’s one of the richest, most powerful men in the world,” John said. “He knows hundreds of people. I only met him once and that was years ago, so I doubt he’ll recognize the fact that you are not me.”

“But—”

John cocked the gun’s hammer again, which immediately led to the end of the conversation.

“Okay,” Colin finally said. “I’ll go.”

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## JUNE 6, 2020

It was just after midnight when Colin followed John outside of the mansion. Towing a backpack full of John’s ill-fitting clothes, Colin nervously walked along the driveway toward the mansion’s five-car garage. Thankfully, John put the gun away and focused solely on preparing his friend for the long drive to upstate Washington.

“Don’t you think it would be better if I left in the morning?” Colin asked. “I’m not a fan of driving at night.”

“There’s no time to wait,” John answered, as opening the garage door. “If you leave now, you should avoid a lot of traffic. Trust me, you’ll make better time this way.”

The garage held some of the most expensive cars money could buy, each of them worth more than Colin’s house. Never having money to buy his own car, the only automobile Colin ever drove (and

only a handful of times at that) was his father's battered pickup truck. Just thinking about driving these foreign luxury cars made him nervous. John must have immediately detected his friend's apprehension and went directly for the one car he hoped would put John most at ease.

"I can't take the Mach One," Colin said. John opened the car door and started the Mustang's powerful V-8 engine. John closed his eyes and revved the engine one final time, enjoying the muscle car's powerful roar, the sound sweeter than any music he'd ever heard. "You worked too hard and wanted this car for too long for me to take it. You've given me enough already."

"What good is the car going to do me in two months?" John asked, standing from the car's driver seat. He pushed the seat forward and threw a bag full of food (mostly granola bars and bottled water) into the backseat. "It's the fastest car of the Fare fleet and speed is the most important thing you need. Besides, it's the only American car of the bunch, the *toughest* of the bunch. Who knows what kind of situation you might find yourself in?"

"Are you sure?" Colin asked.

"Don't worry, if the comet doesn't hit Earth, I'll know where my car is parked," John said, holding up the directions to the Washington motel.

A small part of John was nervous for his friend, but Colin was a survivor, he'd been forced to be one all of his life.

"I have one favor to ask," John said.

"Anything," Colin said.

"I want you to take this and make sure it survives the journey," John said. "And I mean whatever journey you find yourself in after the comet strikes and you get off the submarine, whenever that may be."

John removed the hemp string he always wore around his neck. Attached to the string was the tiny jar of marijuana seeds.

"When you live through everything, I want you to plant these," he said. "You can't let pot become extinct."

Colin shook his head and the two could not help but laugh.



“Time for you to go,” John said.

“I don’t know what to say,” Colin said, unsure how to say goodbye forever to the only important person ever in his life.

“No need to say anything,” John said, extending his hand. “Just make sure you put that ticket to good use.”

Colin felt tears welling in his eyes. He took John’s hand and roughly pulled him forward, embracing the ‘little rich boy’ who’d meant so much to him.

“Thank you,” Colin said.

“How many times do I have to tell you? Only Heather Sanders is allowed to grab me like that,” John joked.

Colin climbed into the front seat and closed the door.

“Good luck,” John said.

“You too,” Colin said.

As he put the car into drive, John reached into his pocket and pulled out one last item: the gun. He tossed it into the backseat, where it disappeared behind the backpack.

“Just in case you get into any trouble,” he said.

Colin nodded. With nothing left to say, Colin followed his friend’s order and drove away, watching as John stood in front of the garage and waved until he turned out of the driveway.

# CHAPTER

# TWENTY-THREE

Lucas Stevens couldn't hear himself think over the whine of helicopter engines and the rushing wind that streamed through the open door. To make matters more difficult, the air entering the chopper felt freezing, despite the heavy parka he wore. Still, the Siberian tundra was incredible and this was the most incredible scouting trip the director ever took to film a movie.

Only a few days passed since Stevens's world had been turned upside down, since he was ripped from his comfortable Hollywood surroundings and thrown into the adventure of a lifetime. He couldn't believe *he'd* be filming the last movie Earth would know for a long time—possibly ever. When Peter Mansfield approached him a week earlier on the set of “Building a Dream,” he'd made an offer Lucas Stevens could not possibly refuse. Making a deal to shoot a movie was not something new for Stevens, but the speed with which the complicated operation got off the ground was unimaginable. One moment, Stevens was agreeing to make this film; the next moment, he was being whisked away from Hollywood and taken on a whirlwind journey across half the globe. If Hollywood moved this quickly and efficiently, Stevens could have directed five movies a year.

Stevens arrived in Moscow a day earlier, a city he felt very familiar with since his most critically-acclaimed film was “Ivan the Terrible.” While the set of that movie had actually been shot on a Hollywood soundstage, everything was constructed to be lifelike and

the digital backdrops of the city were totally accurate. It had always been Stevens's desire to film certain scenes from the movie on location, but the studio would not approve the budget for such a shoot.

But this was another example how this movie was different from anything else he ever did. Upon touching down in Russia, the director was brought directly to Russian President Aleksandr Metachenko, a grizzly bear of a man who spoke English as well as most actors Stevens worked with.

"I have spoken with Peter Mansfield," the Russian president told Stevens, furthering the director's respect for Mansfield's power. "He has requested I provide you with anything you need. I have military helicopters, a large crew and the best guides to bring you to the location in Siberia where the comet will strike."

"Thank you, Mr. President. I am grateful for your help and hospitality," Stevens said. "You have the perfect look for the camera: tough, no nonsense, but also endearing. Could I ask you a few questions for the documentary?"

Despite the President's busy schedule, Metachenko agreed to the impromptu interview. Stevens always carried a small, handheld camera, which he used when asking Metachenko's opinion on the comet.

"Mankind will overcome," Metachenko said. "Intelligent men have planned well. There are many tough years ahead, but the Russians I have selected for our shelter will survive. We are a strong people, we have overcome many obstacles before. This time will be no different."

"Your shelter?" Stevens asked. "What shelter is that?"

Metachenko immediately quieted, realizing he said too much. Instead of answering, the Russian President excused himself.

That night, Lucas Stevens stayed in the most luxurious room he'd ever seen. The director was treated like a king, as mounds of Russian delicacies were brought to his room, expensive caviar and some of the finest vodka to ever cross his lips. Stevens almost forgot he'd been brought to Russia to film a movie.

Stevens met his Russian military crew and guides at the crack of dawn and was brought to a fleet of long-range helicopters. A Russian interpreter named Ilya explained that he would be acting as his assistant for this journey. Ilya started off by suggesting the twelve fortified cameras brought by Stevens be split up evenly among the three helicopters.

“When you find spots to place the cameras, only one helicopter will have to stop while the other two continue to find new spots.”

Within minutes, the three helicopters were flying in tight formation over the Russian capital. The flight to Western Siberia seemed to take forever, the only moments of broken monotony involving two landings to refuel. At the second refueling station, Ilya provided Stevens with a detailed geological map.

“This is the impact zone,” the translator said. “We will arrive shortly. By refueling this second time, we have plenty of time to scan entire location to set up your cameras.”

Stevens tried to figure out details of the map. But even if he could visualize the topographical features of the area, he knew it was unlikely that this would help him decide where to place the fortified cameras. In much the same way Stevens could not visualize his movies based upon pre-production art, he would have to see the area before choosing where the cameras went. This would be a lengthy process once they arrived at the impact zone.

Peter Mansfield allotted Stevens twenty fortified cameras overall, leaving eight to be placed at various other locations across the globe in the next few weeks. Though the comet would not hit for ten weeks, Mansfield informed him that the final shuttle would leave a week before impact. The world was now his stage so Stevens had to decide which global locations to film during Earth’s final moments. A camera would be placed atop the Statue of Liberty and the Eiffel Tower, but there were still six other locations to choose.

*Maybe near the pyramids, Stevens considered. The Taj Mahal perhaps. Putting a camera atop Mount Everest would provide amazing shots, but I doubt there’s enough time to mount such an expedition. And I don’t know if the cameras would hold up under such cold temperatures...*

“Have you decided where you’d like to place the first one?” Ilya asked.

“No, I figured it would be best to see the entire area before I choose,” Stevens said.

“As you like.”

A few minutes later, the helicopters were again soaring through the clouds. But less than ten minutes after the second refueling stop, Ilya spoke into a walkie-talkie and approached Stevens.

“We have arrived,” the Russian said.

Stevens turned in his seat and looked out the small, dirty window at the white world below. Between the helicopter’s altitude, his obscured view and the snow-covered ground below, Stevens was unable to distinguish any of the land’s characteristics.

“Is there any way to go lower?” the director asked.

Ilya spoke into the walkie-talkie, barking instructions in Russian to his men. Within seconds, Stevens felt the helicopter descending until it finally leveled off at a few hundred feet. Still, his view was not very good. He was afraid the chopper would have to land on the ground before he could see well enough to choose.

The Russian translator threw open the nearby helicopter door, sending floods of freezing air through the chopper. Ilya held onto a small safety bar above the door while leaning the rest of his body out the doorway. Although Stevens tightly clutched a nearby chair with both arms, he still felt nervous for the Russian, whose five fingers were all that was standing between him and a plunge to the world below. When Ilya moved the binoculars away from his face, he was surprised to see Stevens not standing right beside him.

“Are you feeling well, Mr. Stevens?” Ilya asked, yelling over the loud noise.

“Of course,” the director answered, forcing himself to let go of the chair once he realized a crash was not inevitable. “You just took me by surprise, opening the door and all. I wasn’t expecting that.”

“You asked for a better view, did you not?” Ilya asked. “You will see no better view than this.”

Ilya held out the binoculars, which Stevens grabbed after taking

a few deep breaths. Staying at least five feet from the doorway, Stevens looked through the binoculars. He had a much better view of the distant land—snow-covered trees, high mountain peaks, fresh snowfall—but still could not see the area directly beneath him.

“If you come closer to edge, you will see the impact zone much better,” Ilya said, as if reading Stevens’s mind. “Do not worry. I will not push you.”

The director nodded. By the time he reached the doorway and Ilya pointed out the safety bar above the door, the director finally had the view he needed.

“Right down there, three o’clock, a small rock outcrop sticking out of the side of that hill,” Stevens said. “I want one of the cameras placed there, with a seventy-degree inclination facing upwards.”

Ilya got on the walkie-talkie and gave the first of twelve instructions for placement of the cameras that day.

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Although Colin never drove anywhere out of state, the directions from southern California to northern Washington weren’t complicated. Once he got onto Interstate Highway 5 heading north, Colin realized he would drive nearly 1,200 miles before getting off of this road.

At this time of night, the roads were completely empty, just as John predicted. Pushing the Mach One just above eighty miles per hour, Colin settled into the middle lane and kept the car heading straight. After an hour of driving, the excited nervousness about the journey—not to mention the melancholy he felt about leaving behind his best friend—finally gave way to weariness. Colin wished he could curl up and sleep for the next eight hours.

Instead, he had at least twenty hours of driving to reach his destination, with the next seven hours in the dark. There was so much uncertainty ahead, so many questions about where he was going and what he would find once he got there. The amount of what-ifs he faced were so numerous that thinking of them made his mind spin.

The harder his brain tried to grasp answers, the wearier he became. He was already tempted to pull to the side of the road and take a quick nap.

*Pull yourself together, he told himself. You just need to go one night without sleep so you to have the chance for a miracle. Don't let yourself down—don't let John down—by blowing this.*

Carefully balancing the steering wheel with one hand, Colin reached behind him into the backseat and grabbed one of the granola bars, hoping a quick sugar fix would reenergize him. When that didn't help, Colin rolled down the window and felt the night air rush into the car, enveloping him in a warm cocoon that made his eyes beg for mercy. The final thing he could do was turn up the radio and hope loud noise made it impossible to fall asleep.

*Focus on the road, Colin thought, as he concentrated on keeping the car between the broken white lines. Focus on the road.*

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John should have been used to being alone in the big mansion. For years, he spent his time alone in the houses where he lived. But during the past week since Colin showed up, John discovered how much he preferred living with somebody else. Having Colin was like having a sibling and now that his best friend was gone, John never felt more alone.

Sitting on the couch, watching the news, John realized it was unlikely he'd ever speak to anyone again. All that was left was waiting for the next ten weeks to pass until the comet struck and ended his life. John was glad he'd given his best friend a second chance at life, but a part of him felt better thinking he would not be alone when the world ended.

Now, that possibility was gone.

Despite the emotional fatigue that weighed heavily on his mind, John had trouble sleeping. Sitting alone in the living room - without the chance of anyone important ever walking through the front door again - the enormity of the comet situation finally struck

John like a ton of bricks. With the three other guns locked in his father's closet, he wondered if it was best to put a permanent end to the insufferable.



# CHAPTER

# TWENTY-FOUR

James Armour and Walter Matthews were two of the busiest, most important men in humankind's plan to continue life. Both played key roles in the future of two of the three arks. Despite the abundance of work both still faced, they joined one another in the small town of Lehigh, Kansas to attend to the 'Inner Circle's' final business.

"I'm glad you could get here so quickly," Armour said when he saw the admiral enter the auditorium of tiny Lehigh High School. The two older men shook hands.

"I've been waiting for your call," the admiral said. "Is everyone here?"

The admiral scanned the confused crowd of approximately 500, a room much quieter than both men were used to. If this had been NASSA headquarters, Armour wouldn't have been able to hear himself think over the boisterous astronomers and rocket scientists. And had this been the seacraft's lobby—even if only ten or twenty of Tyler Ainsworth's guests had occupied the large room—Matthews still had no doubt the noise level would be higher.

"They're all here," Armour whispered, making sure the crowd could not hear. "It's been this quiet for the past twenty minutes."

"Has everyone gotten along okay?" the admiral asked. "I doubt too many country folks would take kindly to their town being invaded by a bunch of strangers."

"Just the opposite," Armour said. "The out-of-towners have

been accepted by the locals. We set up this visit a few months ago and the mayor agreed to have the school's gymnasium set up with cots. But the townspeople would not have it. Every person in this community opened their doors to the others, despite their differences. It's really been amazing. We never could have planned on everything running so smoothly."

Years ago, George Marshall had chosen the small town of Lehigh, Kansas (population 220) as the meeting place for passengers of two of the arks. The choice of Lehigh had been completely random. But the lucky recipients of this town - along with 280 others chosen as part of Peter Mansfield's survivor list - were about to hear an unimaginable offer.

"I suppose we should get started," Admiral Matthews said. "I'm afraid if I'm gone from the seacraft too long, Tyler Ainsworth and his band of merry snobs might attempt something foolish."

"Has he been that bad?" Armour asked.

"Not yet," Matthews answered honestly. "But I definitely see trouble with him in the future."

The two men walked to the small stage at the front of the auditorium, their appearance bringing a small rise from the crowd. Waiting on stage was a large, middle-aged man with a mustache like a walrus and a chubby face to match.

"Admiral Walter Matthews, this is Mayor Benny Coleman," Armour said, making the introductions.

"Thank you for coming to Lehigh, Admiral," the mayor said. "I know this part of the country is as far from the water as you can get. If there's anything I can do to make you more comfortable, let me know."

"Thank you, Mayor, that's very kind," Matthews said.

"Unfortunately, I don't think there's going to be time for that," Armour interjected. "It's time to unveil the big news to your people, Mayor."

"That'll be swell," the mayor said. "Everyone sure could use some answers around here. Don't get me wrong, having all these nice city folks around has been an adventure for many of us. And it's been

a welcome one at that, since all folks around here been talking about is this darn comet. I'm sure everyone'll love to know what's going on, especially me. I knew that big check we got from the government a few years ago to build this school had to come with some kind of string attached."

After selecting Lehigh as the town of choice, George Marshall decided the small town would need its own high school to host this type of meeting. Mayor Coleman was sent a large check made out to the town of Lehigh, which was used for the beautiful facility everyone now waited in.

"I think you'll be pleasantly surprised by *this* string," Armour assured him.

The mayor took his seat in the front row and the crowd quieted when Armour and Matthews approached the podium. Looking out at the crowd, Armour noticed that everyone was mostly separated in the manner he wanted. Just about all of the younger people were seated on the left side of the aisle, while families and the elderly were on the right.

"I would like to thank everyone for coming today," Armour started. "And I would like to thank citizens of Lehigh for opening up your homes and your town for the visitors. I know everyone must have the same thought: why are we here today? Why were 280 people from around the country brought to this small town? It's a simple answer really, but one with many consequences in the long run. It's also an answer I hope will not go beyond the doors of this auditorium.

"The short answer is the comet. As everyone knows, Comet Clement is on its way to Earth. *When* the comet strikes—and notice that I did not use the word *if*—many experts agree that the devastation will be cataclysmic. One can never accurately predict the human will to live through such a catastrophe, but it's been universally assumed that a strike from a comet the size of Clement could lead to the extinction of the human race. Those lucky enough to survive the initial impact will find it very difficult to survive for much longer than a few months. Millions of pounds of dirt and dust will be launched into the atmosphere and will stay there for months or years,

blocking out the sun, bringing upon freezing temperatures that will kill most of the world's vegetation. From that point, it's easy to imagine the difficulty of humankind's continuation: with no plants, there will be no food. Those of you still living on Earth's surface at the time of the impact will be dead by the end of this year."

Armour's blunt honesty created quite a stir in the auditorium, more noise generated from his statement than at any time since he'd been there. Even the mayor turned around to speak excitedly with some of the local Lehigh residents. When the noise finally died down, Armour continued.

"As bleak as the future might be, America has planned for these dire circumstances," Armour said. "As I'm sure everyone heard, the United States recently completed a little project in orbit known as the space station. Originally a scientific project, the space station now serves as a refuge for humankind. Its location miles above the impact zone makes it an ideal place to save nearly a thousand human lives. Those selected to live onboard the station during the 'Inaugural Month' will now be Earth's representatives to survive this comet disaster and continue life on our planet. There will be one final small group of people selected to go to the space station, but nobody here will be part of that."

Again, a loud murmuring echoed throughout the crowd. Once the noise began to quiet, Mayor Coleman stood up and asked Armour the one question on everyone's mind.

"This is all very interesting, but if none of these fine people have the chance to be saved, why come to Lehigh? Why gather all of us together to pass along this grim news?" the mayor wondered.

"Because everyone in this room *will* have the opportunity to live, just not aboard the space station," Armour told them. "When the comet was rediscovered on its new, deadly path, we were lucky enough that two other shelters were in the process of being built, two shelters suddenly transformed into arks that will hopefully save humanity. The existence of both arks is highly confidential, information that must not leave this room. What I'm about to share with you is known only by a handful of people in this world.

“The first of the three arks—the space station—has been built by America in the public eye. The other two arks have been constructed in the utmost secrecy. The first was built by the Russians, a massive bunker constructed deep underground in the Ural Mountain range. I have seen this huge shelter with my own two eyes and mere words can not describe how truly impressive it is. Imagine an exclusive university built hundreds of feet underground; that’s the most accurate description I can give. The Russians originally constructed it as a shelter to be used for the country’s highest government officials in case of a nuclear attack. I’m sure everyone is aware of the troubles Russia has had with China in recent years. News coverage in America might not have portrayed the trouble between the two countries as too serious, but there’s been enough tension for Russia to build such an expensive emergency bunker. Thankfully, tensions have eased over the last couple years, leaving us the good fortune of having such a bunker that will play an even more important role. Because of America’s friendly gesture of allowing 100 Russians aboard the space station, Russia has extended the invitation for 250 Americans to live inside their bunker. Today, I extend those 250 spots to half the people inside of this auditorium.”

Mayor Coleman spoke with a few people in the row behind him and then quieted the crowd to voice his concern.

“According to the news, we’ve been told that building basements and bomb shelters underground wouldn’t provide adequate protection,” the mayor said. “Something about earthquakes causing cave-ins.”

“That is an accurate concern,” Armour answered honestly. “And there’s obviously no guarantee that an underground shelter of *any* kind would or would not be an effective means of security. We just don’t know. The only way to overcome unknown obstacles is by adding as many safety features as possible to protect such a bunker. That’s exactly what Russian engineers have done.

“Most basements and bomb shelters are just below ground level. As I stated earlier, the Russian shelter is *hundreds* of feet down and the entire hull of the shelter was reinforced by thick metal

plating. An added feature of protection is the natural shelter the Ural Mountain range provides. Russian engineers hope the mountains will absorb the brunt of the impact. Again, the results of such an impact are unknown, so experts can only guess at the outcome. There is the possibility the Russian shelter won't hold, but I'm willing to bet *my own life* that it's the best option I've been given. I would hope those in this room given the same chance to come to Russia will also seize the opportunity."

"How can you only choose half of us?" the mayor asked. "How do you decide who stays and who goes? Certainly you won't break up families."

Lehigh citizens loudly agreed with their mayor.

"I can tell you one person selected for the Russian bunker," Armour said. "And that would be you, Mayor Coleman. The others chosen are families with children under the age of 16, as well as citizens over the age of 40."

"But what about the others?" Coleman asked. "Surely it makes more sense for younger, stronger people to continue mankind."

Armour was about to respond to the mayor's inquiry, but Admiral Matthews took this opportunity to step forward.

"That's where I come in," the admiral said. "My name is Admiral Walter Matthews. I have served the United States Navy for... well, math isn't my strong suit, but I've been working on submarines for longer than most of you have been alive. A few months ago, I was approached about a deep-sea project under construction by a private U.S. company by the name of *Ainsworth Industries*. This company sounded familiar to me for two reasons. First, *Ainsworth Industries* has built Navy subs for as long as I've been piloting them. Secondly, they were one of half a dozen companies that submitted designs for the space station contract won by *McNalley & Jones*. Upon their design being rejected, *Ainsworth Industries* focused their attention on building the world's first underwater cruise ship.

"When I first saw the seacraft, I was asked to inspect it to make sure a weapon was not being built. Because the craft was so huge and technologically advanced, the U.S. Navy immediately assumed the

craft was built for nefarious means. Obviously, they were wrong. The seacraft was constructed for the exact reasons Tyler Ainsworth, owner of *Ainsworth Industries*, said. The craft was eventually completed, but before a new vacation could be offered to travelers of the world, news broke of the impending comet disaster.

“Thankfully, Tyler Ainsworth is as much a humanitarian as an entrepreneur,” Matthews lied, unable to hide a mischievous smile. “He has allowed the American government to select half of the craft’s 500 passengers. And those other 250 people consist of the second half the individuals sitting in this room. Everybody within the ages of 16 to 39 will have the opportunity to live aboard the seacraft. Again, there’s no telling exactly how the oceans will respond following the comet strike, but it’s the best we have to offer. Life aboard the seacraft will be tough, that I can promise you. That’s the reason this ark is the one for those in the best shape. Most of the out-of-towners qualify for the seacraft, but a few of you Lehigh natives do, too. I know this is a difficult decision, but unfortunately we do not have the luxury of time. Therefore, everyone between 16 and 39 that wishes to accept the opportunity to live aboard the seacraft, please stand up now.”

Armour and Matthews stared out at the crowd. After a few seconds where members of the audience looked at each other, one person finally stood. All eyes turned to the young man on the Lehigh side of the auditorium, but that did not last long. A second person soon followed and then a third. Soon, a mass of people stood simultaneously. Armour spoke next.

“The same thing goes for the bunker,” Armour said. “Everyone who wishes to go must now stand. If you want to survive, there should be no thought involved.”

Less than a minute later, not a single person remained sitting.

# CHAPTER

# TWENTY-FIVE

Colin McKay only drove for three hours before his weariness finally won its battle with his mind. He knew there was no point rushing to this seacraft if it meant risking his life; Colin didn't think John would be too happy if he crashed and couldn't use the ticket. Instead of forcing himself to continue driving, he pulled into a rest stop a few hundred miles into his long journey.

*Just a quick catnap, Colin told himself once the car was parked in an unlit area of the large lot. Just an hour or two so I'm refreshed for the long trip tomorrow.*

The 1970 Mach One Mustang was considered a sports car back in the day, but the backseat was significantly larger than those in sports cars nowadays. Once Colin climbed into the back and pushed the bags onto the floor, he contorted his body into a position much more comfortable than he expected. He felt a piece of metal sticking into his back and assumed it was part of the seatbelt. But when he reached around his body to push it out of the way, his hand touched the gun John tossed into the backseat. Colin examined it before carefully placing it on the floor near his bags. He glanced at his watch and saw it was a few minutes before 2:30 in the morning.

*I'll sleep until four, he'd planned. Then I'll still have a good three or four hours of driving without much traffic.*

When Colin finally closed his eyes, he was out like a light before his eyelids even touched.

A tapping on the glass snapped open his eyes to a flood of sunlight. Colin immediately knew his plan had failed. He woke with a



start and sat up quickly, turning to see a police officer tapping on his driver-side window. Colin quickly climbed into the front seat and rolled down the window.

“Is everything okay, son?” the police officer asked as he looked suspiciously inside of the car.

“Yes, Officer,” Colin answered, trying to sound respectful. “I was just tired and pulled over to take a quick nap.”

“Where you headed?” the officer asked.

The cop continued looking through the windows into the back of the Mach One. Colin remembered the gun was sitting on the floor in the back. Considering the last time Colin used John’s automobile without searching it first, he wondered if there was anything *else* in the Mach One that would create more problems if the officer kept snooping around.

“I asked you a question, son,” the officer repeated, now looking directly at Colin. “Where are you headed?”

“Washington, sir,” Colin finally blurted. “My...uh...father has business up there and I’m supposed to meet him there.”

The officer continued to glance around the car’s interior. Colin had a bad feeling he was going to ask for identification or proof of insurance—or even worse, ask Colin to step out of the car to search the vehicle. But the expression on the officer’s face suddenly changed from suspicion to curiosity.

“This is a great car,” he said. “What year is it?”

Colin knew as much about cars as he did rocket science, but he’d heard John talk enough so he could pretend he knew what he was talking about.

“1970,” Colin answered. “It’s a Mach One Mustang, one of only a handful left in the world. And I doubt any of them run as good as this one.”

It was the exact boast John had told anyone who ever asked about the car.

“You must be quite a mechanic to keep a classic like this running so well,” the officer said.

“I try,” Colin lied.

“Next time you’re going to take a nap, I suggest stopping at a motel,” the officer said. “These are dangerous times and I doubt carjackers will find an easier mark than a sleeping kid. You can’t trust anybody these days, especially since criminals feel like they have nothing to lose anymore.”

“Yes, sir. I’ll remember that,” Colin said.

“You’d better get moving along if you have to drive all the way to Washington,” the police officer said. “Make sure you buckle up.”

“Always do,” Colin said as the cop turned and got back into his patrol car.

Once the police cruiser drove off, Colin breathed a sigh of relief. He checked his watch and saw it was almost nine o’clock; he overslept by nearly five hours. Without sparing another moment, he turned the key and drove out of the crowded rest stop, wondering how he could’ve been so stupid to sleep through the hustle and bustle of other cars around him.

*John probably thinks I’m near Sacramento by now,* Colin thought. If he hadn’t slept for so long, Colin would’ve been halfway through his journey by now. Instead, he barely made a dent through California. When Colin got onto the ramp and merged back onto I-5, he was relieved to find a steady flow of traffic.

That relief was short-lived. He barely drove for half an hour before spotting a sea of red taillights in front of him; traffic was at a complete standstill. He pounded on the steering wheel but realized his rush to get to Washington was largely due to John’s insistence. After all, neither one of them had any idea if the secret submarine was leaving soon or if it had left already.

*It probably doesn’t matter if I show up tomorrow or sometime next week,* Colin thought. *It’s all up to fate now.*

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“Does that mean we’re leaving tonight?” Tyler Ainsworth asked.

Tyler stood in the control room of the seacraft, the last place

he'd checked for Admiral Matthews. The old man was nowhere to be found on either of the boat's two levels. When Tyler entered the control room and saw the craft now on the Pacific's surface, he knew right away that the admiral was gone. Tyler was disappointed for not waking up when the seacraft raised to the surface.

"I don't know, Mr. Ainsworth," the large military man said, the same exact response he gave to Tyler's other questions. "The admiral left the boat for a short time. I can't tell you anything else."

"What time did he leave?" Ainsworth asked, looking down at his watch to see it was nearly ten in the morning.

"Early, I'm not sure what time," the man said.

It was just like Admiral Matthews to sneak off in the pre-dawn hours to avoid running into Tyler and his questions.

"When do you expect him back with the other passengers?" Tyler asked. "I'd like to be ready to greet everyone when they come aboard."

"I never said the admiral was going to collect anybody," the military man said. "I'd appreciate if you stop putting words into my mouth. Your games aren't going to work."

"Fine," Tyler said. "You don't have to tell me where the admiral went. I just want to tell my guests when we're setting sail. If you can tell me that, I would remember your cooperation in the future."

"Soon," the man said simply.

"As in later today?" Tyler asked. "Or soon tomorrow or the day after that?"

"Very soon," the man said.

"Fair enough," Tyler said. "I suppose I couldn't convince you that we should leave *before* the admiral came back."

"You're correct, you couldn't convince me of that," the man said. "And I think you'd be smart never to repeat such a request again."

Tyler nodded. He still wouldn't be able to tell anyone about his real plan. He still had one final deception to see through to its end and he couldn't take the chance of the wrong person learning the truth.

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The next few hours in Lehigh, Kansas, were spent in a frenzy for 250 of the residents, those soon to leave with Admiral Walter Matthews. Choosing only enough items to fill one small bag proved difficult for most.

Once all 250 finished packing and returned to the high school, it was time for goodbyes. The out-of-towners went first, thanking their gracious hosts and bidding adieu before climbing into one of four school busses waiting to take them to the Colonel James Jabara Airport in Wichita. Matthews did not have to be worried about missing their flight, but the longer it took for them to leave, the more likely there'd be a problem keeping everyone convinced that this was best for them.

Unfortunately, there was no rushing the Lehigh locals, who had to say their farewells to just about every resident of the town.

"You have to understand, Admiral Matthews, small towns like this are different than most cities you're used to," Mayor Coleman told the admiral, who tried to hurry the process along. "Believe me, I know. I was born and raised in Lehigh, couldn't wait to get out of here when I was a teenager. I even moved to the big city—that's Topeka—for a couple years before realizing what I was missing here. We're all a big family and you can't expect us to say 'so long' to each other like we were nothing but strangers passing on the street."

Slowly, most of the passengers made their way onto the busses. The ones with the most trouble saying goodbye were older Lehigh teenagers forced to leave the rest of their families. Armour explained to Matthews that they tried avoiding such a situation. But for the numbers to work and allow every resident of Lehigh a spot on either of the arks, six families were split up.

Matthews was surprised to see the final person waiting to get on the bus. Benjamin Coleman III could barely break from his mother's grasp, nor could his sister Kerry break free from Mayor Coleman's. The mayor's earlier words now had new meaning. Finally, after many tears, the two older teenagers broke from their parents and got onto the bus.

“Please, Admiral. Make sure my kids stay safe,” the mayor said.

“Don’t worry, you will see them again one day,” Matthews assured the mayor, though Coleman knew the words were just as empty as the admiral did. Even if everyone from both arks survived, it was certainly unlikely that the groups from the underwater ark and underground ark would be able to find each other in an annihilated world.

When the mayor returned to his wife and their two younger children, Matthews realized he was the final person that needed to get onto the busses. James Armour approached him with an outstretched hand.

“I’m glad the ‘Inner Circle’ chose you to control the seacraft,” Armour said, shaking hands with the admiral.

“I’m glad they chose me, too,” Matthews said.

“You’ll be the first ark to embark on the long journey,” Armour said. “Everything is in your capable hands now. Good luck.”

“Same to you,” Matthews responded. “Who knows? Maybe I’ll see you again one day.”

Armour smiled and watched the future of the underwater ark disappear as the busses drove away. Tyler Ainsworth and his boat were now Matthews’ headache, a bit of a relief for Armour despite the comet predicament feeling more real than ever.

*One ark down, two to go,* Armour thought.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

After travelling three miles over the next two hours, Colin finally passed the accident creating the traffic backup. He tried to avoid looking at the horrific scene, but like most people, he felt strangely drawn to the carnage caused by the three-car pileup. All the anger and frustration he felt while waiting suddenly felt heartless.

Once clear, it was just after noon. Luckily, the sun shone brightly and the rest of the traffic ran smoothly. During the next eight hours, Colin cruised in the left lane doing eighty, covering over 600 miles. He stopped a few times for gas and food, but realized the amount of money John gave him would not last much longer. By the time the sun began to set and the darkness of night crept across the sky, Colin felt his eyes growing heavy.

“Not again,” he said aloud. “You’re not going to sleep tonight until you get to the submarine.”

Glancing down at the dashboard clock, he saw it was just past eight, still hours away from his normal bedtime. Colin shouldn’t be this tired yet, especially since he woke up so late. But every muscle in his body ached from sitting in the same position for ten hours, an aching that tricked his body into believing he was tired.

*I just need to pull over and walk around for a few minutes, he thought. If I can get a good stretch, I’ll be good for the next eight hours.*

Unfortunately, the next road sign for a rest stop showed it was still 50 miles away. With the thought of exercise in his mind, sitting in

this prone position for the next forty-five minutes seemed like an eternity. As the late evening sky transformed from a dusky dark purple to the nighttime black, Colin felt his eyelids growing heavier and heavier. The rest stop was still half an hour away and Colin wasn't sure he could hold out that long.

Something on the side of the road suddenly caught Colin's attention. Before he had the opportunity to think, he pulled over and slammed on his brakes. Colin wasn't sure what made him stop to help the stranded motorists, but he reminded himself how John had been willing to give up his life to help him. The least Colin could do was reciprocate a good deed, even by helping two random strangers change a tire. Besides, this would be the perfect opportunity to get out of the car, move around a little and stretch his tired muscles. And maybe all of John's tire-changing lessons would pay off...

Colin stepped out and approached the younger couple, immediately noticing that they were not the type of people he normally conversed with. Had his fellow students from the Zwier Academy seen this man and woman, the couple would've been referred to as "trailer trash." The woman wore a torn pair of jeans, a T-shirt two sizes too small and far more makeup than necessary. The man also wore shabby jeans and a sleeveless undershirt small enough to show dozens of tattoos on both arms. When the couple approached Colin and smiled, he saw that dental hygiene didn't seem a top priority on their list.

*Who do you think you are?* Colin thought about himself, suddenly ashamed to be judging two people based solely on their appearance. The wardrobe selection he'd had his entire life wasn't much better than what these two were wearing.

"Thank you so much for stopping," the woman said. Her voice was deep and throaty, as if she smoked one carton of cigarettes too many. "We been trying to flag someone down for near an hour but nobody wanted to do nothing to help us."

If she had the same pampered lifestyle of so many girls that Colin knew, she may have been attractive. Instead, she was with the shady guy who remained in the shadows. Colin sensed he was trying

to avoid making eye contact. The man's unfriendly demeanor should have set off warning bells in Colin's mind, but the woman seemed friendly.

"More than happy to help," Colin said. "What seems to be the problem with the tire?"

"Bud, come show our new friend what happened to the tire," the woman said.

Bud spit out a mouthful of tobacco before leading Colin to their broken-down car.

"That's a nice ride you got there," Bud said. "'70s Mustang, right?"

"That's right, a 1970," Colin said. "You know your cars pretty well."

"Must've cost you a fortune," Bud added.

Colin didn't know how much he should say so he walked over to Bud's car and looked at the tire.

"Must've hit something in the road a while back," Bud said. "The damn tire just went flat on me. Lucky I was doing the driving. Larlene probably would have crashed if she was behind the wheel."

Larlene smacked Bud in the arm, but something seemed forced about their playful banter. Regardless, Colin felt good stretching his legs. As Bud and Larlene said, the tire was indeed flat. But Colin nearly froze when he saw the problem. There was a large gash on the side of the tire, a gash impossible to make by simply driving over something. In fact, it looked like someone had taken a knife and slashed it.

"Bud, you seem like you know your way around cars," Colin said. "Don't you have a spare?"

Bud and Larlene looked at each other for a moment before he turned back to Colin.

"Got the tire in the trunk," Bud said. "And got the tire iron right here." Bud held up the lengthy piece of iron. "But can't seem to find the jack nowhere. If you could loan me yours a few minutes, that would really help."

Colin wondered why Bud or Larlene hadn't just asked him that



in the first place. The longer he talked to them, the more Colin became suspicious of the situation. It was too late for him to get back in his car and drive away, though. Colin decided to get out his jack, give it to these people and get back on the road as quickly as possible.

Now if only he knew where the jack was located...

Colin popped the trunk of the Mach One and began to rummage around. Dozens of empty boxes littered the trunk, boxes that once held all different car parts, undoubtedly from the upgrades John completed. After a couple of minutes, he finally located the spare tire, but still could not find the jack.

"Having trouble over there?" Larlene asked.

Colin glanced over his shoulder and saw the couple much closer to him. *Who owns a car and doesn't know where the jack is?* Colin asked himself. *I'm looking more foolish by the second.*

"Sorry, never got a flat in this car," Colin answered. "Haven't had a reason to use the jack yet."

In his frantic search, Colin never saw Larlene urging Bud forward.

"Let me help you look," Bud said.

Colin felt uncomfortable with Bud so close to him. As he turned to decline the strange man's help, Colin learned the hard way that he had every reason to be suspicious. The last thing Colin saw was Bud swinging the tire iron toward his head. A sickening thud—which Colin would later realize was the sound of iron connecting with his skull—was quickly followed by blackness.

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The plane ride from Wichita to Seattle took about three hours. That time was spent in relative silence by most of the passengers soon to board the seacraft. Admiral Matthews clearly heard crying during the flight; most of the conversations he overheard sounded melancholy. Matthews understood the fear and uncertainty these people were facing, but he could not comprehend why the feeling was mostly negative. These people were getting the opportunity of a

lifetime—an opportunity that billions across the globe would die for—but nobody seemed to appreciate that they'd have a chance for survival. Matthews hated complainers and began to wonder if Tyler Ainsworth's 'guests' - though egotistical and self-centered - might actually be easier to deal with in the future.

“Will we arrive at this submarine tonight?” a young man asked when the passengers transferred from the plane to the busses at the airport.

Matthews was behind his self-imposed schedule by nearly four hours. With at least an hour's drive to the motel - not to mention at least another few hours of transporting the passengers onto the boat - the admiral figured they'd be lucky to have everyone aboard by midnight. Matthews hoped to launch the seacraft by tomorrow morning.

“Actually, son, it's not technically a submarine,” Matthews explained to Ben Coleman III. The son of the Lehigh mayor was trailed closely by his younger sister, Kerry. Although the admiral had little time for questions, he felt obliged to make the Coleman children as relaxed as possible. “An underwater seacraft is different from a sub. But to answer your question, yes, we will be arriving tonight. Hopefully we'll set sail soon after.”

“Are we the only people on board?” Benny asked.

“No, it's already half full,” the admiral said. “This group is the second half of the craft's passenger list.”

“Nobody else will be allowed aboard?” Coleman asked.

“Unfortunately, we're going to be at full capacity,” Admiral Matthews said.

“But won't other people come? Won't they try anything possible to get aboard if they're desperate enough?” the young man asked.

“That's exactly why we have to leave before anyone discovers the seacraft,” Matthews said. “As long as nobody discovers us in the next twenty-four hours, we won't have to worry about invasion. And if somebody *does* stumble upon the boat, we'll take the appropriate actions necessary to protect ourselves.”

Rain began to fall, abruptly cutting short the conversation. Rain was one more factor that the admiral knew would push back his schedule even farther.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

JUNE 7, 2020

TWO MONTHS, FIFTEEN DAYS UNTIL IMPACT...

Colin McKay slowly returned to consciousness when the car he rode in hit some type of bump. Searing pain erupted inside of his brain, a pain he'd never felt before despite the beatings his father once gave him. A moan of pain rose in his throat, but before Colin opened his mouth, his mind fought through the anguish and remembered what happened.

*The tire iron, Colin thought. The two hicks needed help fixing their flat tire and Bud hit me with the tire iron.*

Colin soon heard the sound of their voices.

"Try not to hit any of them bumps," Larlene said, her voice barely louder than a whisper. "We don't want to wake him up."

Colin decided that it was best to keep his eyes closed for the time being, especially since the couple thought he was still knocked out.

"First I can't listen to none of the music I want," Bud complained. "And now you're gonna tell me how I shouldn't drive? We shoulda killed that kid and left him on the side of the road."

*Kill?* Colin thought. *What the hell have I gotten myself into? Come on, Larlene, don't let him talk like that.*

"You know we can't kill him," she said.

Despite the ringing inside of his head, Colin felt relieved that

Larlene was the sensible one of the couple.

“At least we couldn’t kill him *there*,” she finished, dread rushing back to Colin’s pained mind. “If anyone found a dead body by that car, they could find fingerprints and come looking for us. If you woulda filled that piece of junk with more gas, we never woulda been in this mess.”

“Can’t cry over no spilled milk now,” Bud slurred. “Why don’t we just kill him and dump his body now? I can’t stand driving with no music.”

“Wait just a little longer,” Larlene said. “Another ten minutes or so and we should be out in no man’s land. Then you can kill him and dump his body in the woods.”

As difficult as it was to ignore the splitting pain in his head, Colin knew that pain was better than the impending alternative. He waited nearly a minute before opening his eyes. He found himself sprawled out in the backseat of the Mach One. The sky outside was completely dark, much as it was when he pulled over to help. There was no telling how much time he’d lost on his journey to Washington, or how far out of the way this crazy couple took him.

His body facing the back of the front seats, Colin’s arms were behind him, pinned to the backseat by his own body weight, held in place by some sort of binds. Concentrating was increasingly difficult through the unwavering pain threatening to rip away his consciousness. But he focused on running his fingers across the ties, which he soon figured out was only a seatbelt. He wriggled his wrists around, happy to find quite a bit of slack; Bud was apparently no good at tying knots.

Over the next five minutes, Colin continued to wiggle his hands and wrists as quietly as possible. Not only did he want Bud and Larlene oblivious to his consciousness, he wanted to hear if the couple said anything else. Unfortunately, the two weren’t big conversationalists. The only noise Colin heard was the rush of wind through the cracked windows, the swishing of his hands against the seatbelts and the constant hammering in his head, which grew worse with every passing moment.

Colin slowly raised his body just enough to slip his right arm out from beneath him. The soreness in his shoulder and the tingling sensation in his hand told him his arms had been stuck behind him for several hours. His eyes didn't readjust to the darkness as quickly as usual. When Colin tried concentrating, the explosion of pain inside his head made him force back the bile rising in the back of his throat.

*Fight through the pain*, Colin tried convincing himself. *If you can't deal with this pain for a few more minutes, you won't live to feel anything else again.*

Colin moved his head forward a few inches until he could see over the lip of the Mach One's bench-style backseat. On the floor in front him were bags of food and clothes John had thrown in the backseat before he left. It looked like Bud or Larlene simply pushed the stuff from the seat to the floor. It was at this moment Colin remembered what *else* John had tossed in the back.

*If they looked close enough and found that, then I'm really in trouble*, Colin thought.

He quietly reached his hand over the edge of the seat, slowly dropping it among the bags and junk on the floor. He rifled through the stuff, feeling everything but what he wanted. With every passing second, his level of uneasiness rose higher. This extra pressure did not help the pain, which seemed to increase every time his hand touched something that wasn't what he needed.

Blackness slowly began to creep over Colin's peripheral vision. By the time he understood that his waking moments were numbered by mere seconds, Colin desperately grasped at everything he could reach on the floor. Colin felt like he was falling down the deep hole of nothingness when he suddenly felt his hand grabbing hold of cool metal.

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Larlene glanced behind the speeding Mustang and saw the highway completely empty. Having turned off I-5 an hour earlier, the couple were far enough from civilization. Bud and Larlene didn't have

much of a plan about where they were headed, but since the Comet Clement announcement was made, they decided to get far away from the trailer community where they lived.

“The cops don’t care no more,” Bud told Larlene when they stole their first car several days earlier. “Nobody cares about no stolen car or a few missing people.”

Bud was certainly no stranger to crime, having done time in prison twice before. And that was only because he’d been *caught*. But with the fear of police and jail no longer in the forefront of his mind, Bud did not bat an eye at raising his level of violence. The unlucky couple from the last car were the first to suffer his newfound wrath, the same wrath this little rich punk would soon face.

Bud had never driven a car as sweet as the Mustang and he truly enjoyed the ride for the first hour. But soon, the novelty of driving such a car wore off and all he could think about was killing the rich kid in the backseat. He never had such a lust for blood before, but knowing he could do whatever he wanted - whenever he wanted - made Bud feel more empowered than ever.

“Are we good?” Bud finally asked.

“Yeah, I don’t see nobody coming,” Larlene answered. “Pull over onto the grass. Make sure you turn the lights out.”

Bud did as she said, coming to a stop just before a large grove of trees a few feet beside the road. He turned off the ignition before jumping out of the car.

“Don’t take him out just yet,” she ordered. “We should wait a few minutes to make sure no more cars drive by.”

Bud still leaned into the backseat, though. When he finally stood up straight, the light from the moon showed a perplexed look on his face.

“The kid ain’t tied up no more,” Bud said. “I tied his arms behind him with the seatbelts before we started driving. Guess I didn’t tie the knot tight enough.”

Larlene glanced through the window into the backseat. When they’d put him in the car, the kid’s back was against the seat, both hands behind him. Now, he was lying on his back, his right arm

draped at an awkward angle over the edge of the seat, his hand lost among the pile of junk on the car's floor. Larlene knew Bud was capable of screwing up the knot, but it still seemed strange that the kid was on his back. If he'd come loose, it was more likely that he'd roll onto his stomach. And his arm was at an unnatural angle, as if purposely trying to reach down onto the floor for something...

Any thought of waiting for passing traffic left Larlene's mind when warning bells rang in her head.

"Take him out now," Larlene said forcefully. "Do what you have to so we can get the hell out of here."

"But I thought you said—"

"Forget what I said," Larlene snapped. "Nobody's coming, everything will be fine."

"Whatever you say," Bud said with a mischievous grin.

Bud reached into the car and grabbed Colin's ankles, ready to tug the rich kid right out of the car and drop him on his head. Fortunately for Colin, his head would take no more abuse today.

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Colin woke with a start when he felt hands grabbing his ankles. His eyes snapped open and he immediately realized the danger. Bud looked stunned to see Colin awake and let go of his ankles. He quickly reached into his pocket and took out a knife, flipping it open to reveal a very sharp blade.

Lying on his back in the confined backseat of a car was not the ideal defensive position, so Colin did the only thing he could to protect himself: he brought his hands up. The look of dominance on Bud's face transformed into one of fear and defeat, leaving Colin confused. Colin felt something cool clutched tightly in his hand, something that he remembered grabbing just before passing out. His friend's gun was now aimed at Bud.

"Get back or I'll shoot," Colin screamed loudly, which did not help his pounding head. Bud slowly backed away. "Stop right there."

Colin sat up in the car and began to edge his way toward the



open driver's door. Bud stood with his hands up, the knife still in his right hand.

"Drop the knife," he yelled. Bud looked at the knife and hesitated a second too long. "Drop it!"

Bud finally acquiesced, leaving Colin feeling like he had the situation under control. But Bud's defeated expression soon changed to one of desperation, resembling a cornered animal with nothing left to lose.

*Everything is okay, Colin assured himself. If he charges me, I shoot him. He was going to kill me, so I'll kill him if it comes to that.*

Colin began to awkwardly climb out of the backseat, not realizing just how dizzy and nauseous he'd feel upon standing. The rush of blood to his head nearly caused him to collapse. His foot got stuck on the seatbelt as he climbed out and he stumbled forward, nearly crashing to the ground.

Bud did not hesitate to make his move.

Colin's peripheral vision began to darken, but he still saw Bud make a move toward his knife. Colin feared unconsciousness could strike at any moment so he pulled the trigger just as Bud grabbed the knife. The loud bang sent a painful shockwave through Colin's brain, but it also pushed away the growing darkness in front of his eyes.

Colin heard Bud's grunt of pain and Larlene's scream of fear before seeing if his shot connected. Bud collapsed to the ground and clutched his knee. Colin's assailant yelled every expletive under the sun, but did not make another move for his weapon. Instead, he stared at Colin with hatred and pain in his eyes, momentarily leaving Colin feeling guilty.

*Are you crazy? Colin asked himself. You heard what Bud said before. He was going to kill you and Larlene was going to let him.*

"You," Colin said, pointing at Larlene. "Slowly pick up that knife."

Larlene made no sudden movements when she bent over and picked up Bud's knife.

"Now throw it into the woods," Colin demanded.

Larlene did as she was told.

“Sit down next to him,” Colin told her. “Now, how long ago did we get off of Interstate 5?”

“Go to hell,” Bud said defiantly. Having no desire to get into a war of words, Colin turned his focus to Larlene.

“How long ago did we get off of I-5?” he repeated.

“You better not tell him a damn thing,” Bud hissed at her between groans of pain. “When he leaves, you still gonna have to deal with me.”

“How long?” he yelled. When Larlene still said nothing, Colin took a few steps forward and aimed the gun at Bud’s head. “If you don’t tell me *right now*, I’m going to do what you two planned to do to me.”

Tears began to flow down Larlene’s cheeks. Without looking at her boyfriend for approval, she finally began to talk.

“If you turn around and stay on this road, you should be back on I-5 in just over an hour.”

Colin turned around and got back into the Mustang, the keys still in the ignition. Without giving the crazy couple another look, he made a U-turn and pushed the pedal to the floor. When he was a few minutes away, he grabbed the bag of clothes now on the passenger’s seat. He carefully placed the gun in the bag and zipped it up. Despite his head still pounding, Colin felt good enough to keep driving.

*No time for rest now*, he told himself. *You just had a couple extra hours of sleep that you couldn’t afford.*

# CHAPTER

# TWENTY-EIGHT

Though the government passengers were on board and the seacraft was full, life on the upper level continued as usual. In fact, a large majority of guests on the upper level would have had no idea the boat was full if they hadn't been told.

One upper level passenger who *did* know was Marc Hudson. Tyler's personal assistant was assigned to help the government passengers moving in. Marc already lugged suitcases around for the rich people, but this time didn't even have Nigel Huffington to help him. Nigel was nowhere to be seen, leaving Marc to wonder if this was his punishment.

*Don't think of it that way, Marc thought as he showed a brother and sister to their small room. Tyler just wants me to become more involved and gain a greater knowledge of who's on board down here. Maybe Nigel is the one being punished for not having this same responsibility.*

Marc did not hear a single complaint from the new arrivals, despite space being so limited. Marc could barely walk down one of the hallways without turning sideways when someone walked in the opposite direction. Had any upper level passenger been forced to live in such tight quarters, the rich snob would complain until turning blue in the face. It was actually refreshing being around people appreciative of the chance to survive.

That did not mean Marc preferred to live on the lower level

with these people, though. As much as his repugnance for the upper level guests grew with every passing day, Marc was accustomed to the elegance of his own room. His room alone was probably as large as four of the lower level rooms combined. Marc overcame his claustrophobia when Tyler first began building this seacraft, but living in one of these tiny rooms would probably drive him crazy.

“Thank you, sir,” the young man said, his accent Midwestern. “My name’s Ben, this is my sister, Kerry. Maybe we’ll see you around sometime.”

Marc knew that was unlikely, but smiled and shook the young man’s hand, impressed by the friendliness from a total stranger. That was the general mood on the bottom level. Even when Admiral Matthews made an appearance, there was something about the cranky old man that was different around these normal people. He was much friendlier, stopping to shake hands or answer questions. The admiral certainly didn’t have his usual ill-tempered expression. But when Matthews saw Marc approaching him, the look on his face reverted back to its scowl.

“I need to talk to you,” the admiral said. “I just saw Tyler upstairs. He needs to see you right away.”

“What for?” Marc asked. He just spoke with his boss a few hours earlier, during which time Tyler assigned him to be the welcoming committee.

“I didn’t ask,” Admiral Matthews snapped.

Marc made his way through the maze of corridors until he found the door marked: DO NOT ENTER. Marc entered the stairwell that led to the upper level.

After spending the past few hours downstairs, Marc was immediately struck by the contrast between the feeling from both floors. The upper corridors were much wider and fancier, but the air of supremacy from upper-level guests was stifling. Marc wished the passengers from the two floors could switch.

He made his way to Tyler’s door and entered after knocking.

“You wanted to see me?” Marc asked.

Tyler appeared downtrodden and frustrated behind his big

desk. Usually so confident—almost to the point of being arrogant—Tyler hadn't looked this hopeless since running out of money to build the seacraft. Whatever was going on must be serious.

"Yes, I need to talk to you about something we already discussed," Tyler said. "Please, sit down. How is everything going down below?"

"Very well," Marc answered. "Everyone seems friendly. I don't think we'll have a problem with anyone down there."

"And the security checks?" Tyler asked.

"The admiral's men were very thorough," Marc answered. "They checked every person that came on board. No guns, no knives, nothing resembling a weapon. Are you sure *your* guests shouldn't be checked, just in case someone tried to sneak a weapon aboard?"

"These are wealthy people, trustworthy people that I hand selected. Besides, I warned them that trying to sneak a weapon on board would result in the immediate forfeiture of their room," Tyler explained. "But that's exactly why we had to check the bags of the lucky scum on the lower level. We can't trust the government to select reliable people."

Having met and spoken with many of the new passengers, the last word Marc would chose to describe them was 'scum.' Still, he knew that his boss would not want to hear this so he merely nodded in agreement.

"Anything else on your mind, sir?" Marc asked.

Tyler exhaled a deep breath of annoyance and collapsed back in his chair. Tyler was usually very confident, and Marc was unaccustomed to seeing his boss like this.

"It's the same thing I've had on my mind all week," Tyler said.

"The government testing?" Marc asked.

Tyler already complained a handful of times about this topic the previous few days. Tyler was informed by the government that the seacraft was to do a weeklong test run along the Western seaboard. The government wanted to track the movements of the craft and ensure all safety precautions were met before the seacraft was allowed to disappear into the deep waters of the Pacific Ocean.

“Our equipment on board isn’t powerful enough to send a signal to D.C.,” Tyler complained. “Which means we’re going to need a person to remain here on shore. That way, we can broadcast our positions here, which can then be sent to the government.”

“One of the admiral’s men going to stay behind to do it? I wouldn’t think any other passenger would have the knowledge to operate Naval communication equipment,” Marc said.

“Actually, Matthews assured me the gear is easy to use. But he also refuses to attempt sailing this boat without his three men,” Tyler explained. “He told me that the government refuses to send someone all the way out here to be the middleman. They want someone from the craft, someone who knows the ins and outs of the boat, to stay behind and act as a liaison.”

Marc had the feeling he knew where this was going, which would end badly for him. But hearing what Tyler said next, Marc was right about the bad part, just not in the way he originally thought.

“The number of people to choose from is three,” Tyler said. “First—and probably most logical—would be me. I obviously have the most knowledge about my boat and would be able to explain any questions the government might have. But I hesitate to take this duty. For one—and I blame this squarely on being around Nigel so much over the years—I am paranoid.”

“Paranoid?” Marc asked.

“Don’t tell Nigel I told you this but he thinks Admiral Matthews has been planning on finding a way to have me removed from my own seacraft,” Tyler said.

“Why would Matthews want you gone?” Marc asked. “You know the boat like the back of your hand. You’ll be the best ally he’s got.”

“Matthews might not like me *because* I don’t need him to keep control over the seacraft. He might look at me as a threat instead of a friend. Or Matthews might be acting on orders from the government,” Tyler said. “It’s no secret that I haven’t complied the way they’d like.”

“Does Nigel have any proof of this?” Marc wondered.

“Nothing but paranoia, which is exactly why I’m not giving too much credence to his warnings,” Tyler said. “But I don’t want to stay behind because it is my duty to remain on board at all times.

Matthews might officially be the captain, but *I* made sure this seacraft was built. *I* helped design the blueprints, *I* used my fortune to build it, *I* raised money when it was needed and *I* was in charge of the first trip from the shipyard to the hotel. This is *my* baby and I’ll be damned if the government expects me to leave her when she takes her first real steps in the ocean. And if disaster does strike—if I did mess up along the way—and she goes down, I think I deserve to go down with her.”

“I understand why you’d want to remain,” Marc simply said.

“So the only other two people left are Nigel and you,” Tyler said. “Like I was saying about Nigel, his mental state is so rocky I could *never* trust an important task to him. Although...” Tyler paused for a moment and smiled for the first time since Marc had entered his room. “...it might be funny to leave Nigel behind to give his crazy talk to the government. They wouldn’t have any idea what he was talking about. That would serve them right for demanding so much of me.”

The thought of leaving Nigel to deal with the government—the one thing in life he feared the most and trusted the least—was amusing, but Marc knew just as well as Tyler that that was just not a possibility.

“Who knows?” Marc asked. “Nigel could have a nervous breakdown, not pass along information and then the government could think we were making a run for it. With our luck, the Navy would hunt us down and blow us out of the water before the comet struck.”

“Exactly what I was thinking,” Tyler said.

“Which leaves me,” Marc said.

Tyler sat straighter in his chair and the sadness disappeared from his face. While Marc expected his boss to run with this idea, Tyler did just the opposite, angrily shaking his head.

“I couldn’t do that to you,” Tyler said. “You’ve been with me for too long, you’ve done too much to ensure this boat was built correctly. I could never expect to leave you behind for our the first

real trip.”

Marc felt good to hear his boss speak so highly of him.

“Then what are we going to do?” he asked.

Tyler threw his arms up in frustration and again collapsed into his chair. After thinking for a moment, Tyler leaned forward and whispered to Marc.

“If the three of us are going to stay on board, then we can’t comply with the government’s orders,” Tyler said.

The conspiratorial tone of his boss’s voice frightened Marc, especially when he considered what Tyler might be possibly saying.

“But won’t—”

“Shhh,” Tyler whispered. “You never know who’s listening around here.”

“Won’t that mean Admiral Matthews will be forced to make the decision between the three of us?” Marc asked.

Tyler shook his head.

“Do you remember what I mentioned before?” he asked. “About what we need to do if we didn’t want to follow the government’s rules?”

“You mean make a run for it?” Marc asked, appalled by what Tyler was insinuating.

Tyler nodded his head.

“What about Matthews? He’ll never give up command of the seacraft to you,” Marc said. “And he’ll never agree to run from the government.”

“I know,” Tyler said. “That’s why we have to get rid of him and his three men. I wish I had thought of this earlier when Matthews was already gone. Overpowering four of them will be difficult. But if we’re all going to stay together, I don’t see any other way of doing things. Like I said before, I’m willing to die and go down with my boat. I see no reason why I wouldn’t die trying to take command of what is truly mine. Are you with me?”

It seemed like such a simple question, but Marc’s mind raced. Taking control of the seacraft would mean violence—possibly even death—and Marc wasn’t sure he was ready to partake in that. After



all, the government's demand of a trial run did not seem unreasonable—at least not bad enough to kill or *be* killed about.

"There must be a better way of handling this," Marc said.

"Either we do what they say—something that none of the three of us will agree to do—or we spill blood for what's rightfully ours," Tyler said. "It's as simple as that; no way of getting around it."

"If we *do* comply with the testing, we could do as we please after a week?" Marc asked.

"The admiral would have the final say in exactly where we head but yes, we could finally travel as we pleased," Tyler said. "I still don't know if that's our best option. Sometimes you have to fight for what you believe."

Marc's thought process was headed in the opposite direction of bloodshed. He could not even consider the thought of Tyler's violent plans.

"If we agreed to this testing, when would the boat begin this weeklong process?" Marc asked.

Tyler appeared confused by his assistant's reluctance for fighting, but glanced down at his watch nonetheless.

"Well, it's two in the morning right now," Tyler said. "We could probably castoff by noon today if we wanted. But why? What does any of that matter?"

There was no way Marc wanted to leave the seacraft, but he wanted to stay even less if it meant starting a war.

"I'll stay behind," he finally said. "I'll act as liaison."

"Why would you do that?" Tyler asked. "I'm more than willing to go to war to keep my people together."

"It's only a week," Marc said. "I know more about the boat than everyone but you. I'll do my part to make sure everyone remains safe. I can wait a week."

Tyler forced himself to appear disappointed.

"If that's what you want," Tyler said.

# CHAPTER

# TWENTY-NINE

George Marshall's worry about the brewing unrest was soon a concern for the other two members of his space station 'Inner Circle.' Sergeant Michael Blatchford and Lillian Edwards both heard of Marshall's encounter with Wesley Maddox and Patrick O'Brien. The former president worried Maddox could start trouble among the passengers. O'Brien's story about becoming engaged spread around the station. He suddenly seemed to be the one person the new 'Inner Circle' had to get on their side. Maddox was no doubt an important man, but he had no real motivation to get back to Earth..

But love was different. Love was the most powerful force the 'Inner Circle' could ever have to fight, a fight that *could* gather enough passengers against Marshall to lead to serious trouble. O'Brien was the key piece to this solving this puzzle, but Marshall couldn't give in to the man's demand to leave the space station. If the former president showed weakness, he ran the risk of losing total control. Marshall still tried to think about the best way to handle the situation but in the meantime, Sergeant Blatchford's Marines began to keep a look out for O'Brien and Maddox.

Meanwhile, Marshall came up with an assignment for his other station confidante, Lily. Her expertise lay with her knowledge of the station, but there was still one group aboard the station whose support Marshall hoped to gain. Lily could be key in helping him. Lily's past relationship with Slava Kovalchuk was something Marshall hoped to

use to his advantage in gaining the trust of the Russian passengers on board. Arriving at the space station after the scientists/military but before the randomly selected passengers, the Russian contingency kept mostly to their section of the space station over the past month. This group consisted mostly of those once part of the Russian cosmonaut program. Even though a few of the Russians spoke English, the language barrier between them and the rest of the American passengers undoubtedly led to self-imposed isolation from the rest of the station.

But now that everyone knew their stay on the station was greatly extended, Marshall refused to sit back and allow Kovalchuk the opportunity to be approached by Maddox and O'Brien. The former president dispatched Lily to speak with him and discover Slava's position on where their allegiance stood.

"My best student," Slava beamed when Lily entered his pod. "What brings you to our part of the station?"

Lily immediately felt safe in Slava's presence, a feeling that built during her training. She'd quickly impressed the Russian during that time and he never made a secret that she was his favorite student. Lily felt guilty that she hadn't come to visit Slava sooner.

"I wanted to come and get your opinion on what's happened over the last few days," Lily said. "A lot of people on board are placing unnecessary blame on George Marshall. I was wondering if you and your people felt the same."

Kovalchuk nodded, but the questioning look on his face made Lily feel guilty.

"*You* were wondering?" he asked. "Or *George Marshall* was wondering and sent you to find out?"

"I take it you've spoken with Wesley," Lily said.

"I have," Slava nodded. "Just a few hours ago. You two are like siblings battling for the attention of one parent. And here I thought you and Wesley were close."

"We were," Lily said. "But we have differing views about the circumstances we've found ourselves in. I don't care *how* or *why* we were brought to the station; we're here and I plan on making the best

of a bad situation. Wesley, on the other hand, refuses to view this situation in any way but negative. He seems intent upon rallying as many people toward his cause, a cause that can not lead anywhere good.”

“You’ve aligned yourself with George Marshall and refuse to see anything from anyone else’s point of view,” Kovalchuk said.

Lily felt like she was ten years old again, that her father was disappointed in her. Feeling this way put her on the defensive dealing with her Russian mentor.

“You’re siding with Wesley, aren’t you?” she asked, unable to hide the disappointment in her voice. “You think he’s right and you think I’m being used as a pawn by Marshall. That’s the last thing I want anyone to think because it’s not true. I just agree that the calmer everyone remains, the easier it will be to deal with this horrible situation in the long run.”

“In America, you have free speech, yes?” Slava asked. “Wesley is speaking what is on his mind.”

“You’ve joined his alliance then?” she asked. “You’re willing to risk the safety of everyone on board because a few people don’t want to be here?”

“You don’t understand Wesley. As much as he dislikes the way he was brought here, I do not think he wants to leave,” Slava said. “It is the other man, this Patrick O’Brien, who could cause the trouble. He is so much in love that he might be very dangerous.”

“We know where Wesley stands and we know where O’Brien stands,” Lily said. “What I came here to find out is where you stand.”

Slava smiled.

“I think you sometimes forget where I come from,” the Russian said. “In Russia—especially being in the space program—we do not create in our minds what we think. We are *told* what to think by those in charge. This was something Wesley knew before he even came to me. George Marshall is in charge. My men and I will do as he wishes.”

“So if someone else gained control?” Lily asked.

Slava shrugged his shoulders.

“You better make sure that does not happen,” Slava said. “And

the best way to do that would be to deal with O'Brien."

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Lily made her way back to the control room, where George Marshall and Sergeant Blatchford discussed the intel gathered by the Marines.

"O'Brien has been speaking with many passengers over the past few days," Blatchford reported. "But none of my soldiers overheard what was being discussed. O'Brien has been careful to shut up when my people approached. In the few instances we've questioned other people about their conversation with him, everyone agreed that the man talked to them about his fiancée and about being kept here against his will."

"You haven't heard the whole story," Marshall said. "I was just telling Sergeant Blatchford about one of the scientists I ran into about ten minutes ago—the same scientist spotted with O'Brien and Maddox earlier in the day. He asked me whether I knew about the comet before I came aboard the space station. Don't you think the timing of such conspiracy-theory questions is a bit odd?"

"Not especially," Lily answered honestly, clearly to the displeasure of Marshall. "I've thought the same thing before."

"I take it your meeting with Slava Kovalchuk did not go well? I don't see any other reason why you'd begin siding with *them*," Marshall said.

Lily did not appreciate Marshall immediately jumping on her the moment she said something he didn't like. Sergeant Blatchford - who apparently went along with anything that the former president said - suddenly glared as if she was one of the possible conspirators.

"I'm not siding with them," she said, defending herself. "But as you thought, Slava was approached by Maddox and O'Brien. But you'll be happy to know the Russians aren't interested in any sort of trouble. In fact, Slava is under the impression that *O'Brien* is the one we should focus on, not Wesley."

"Maybe you should consider letting him leave," Blatchford

added. "It might put an end to this problem."

Lily nodded her head, despite Marshall's sigh.

"Letting O'Brien leave would cause even bigger problems," Marshall said. "Order must be kept at all times; that can't be done if anyone questions who's in charge. I would've expected you to understand the importance of that, Sergeant."

Blatchford nodded and remained quiet, ashamed of his momentary disagreement with Marshall. Recently, the former president did not seem to like when Lily disagreed with anything he thought, but she refused to sit back and become a "yes man." If Marshall decided to include her in his 'Inner Circle,' he obviously respected her opinion at one time. She wasn't going to keep silent, even if that meant Marshall no longer included her on the important decisions.

"This isn't just a black or white issue," Lily said. "Your answer to letting O'Brien leave doesn't simply have to be yes or no. Maybe find a better resolution."

At moments like these, George Marshall missed the 'Inner Circle' he had on Earth.

*What can I expect?* Marshall thought to himself. *I'm just dealing with a couple of kids. They're both young enough to be my children.*

Realizing he was on his own to make decisions—at least until Peter Mansfield arrived with the rest of the 'special' passengers—Marshall decided to consider how his original 'Inner Circle' members would have approached this situation. In particular, Marshall had to think about how Mansfield—the man he trusted to make the tough decisions—would handle Patrick O'Brien.

"If we found out that O'Brien was causing problems, we could wait until everyone falls asleep one night, stick O'Brien in one of the docking stations and open up the doors that lead to space," Marshall said, only *half-joking*. "All of our problems would float away."

Blatchford's stone-faced reaction showed he was no stranger to following orders that might be a bit ugly. But the shocked look on Lily's face proved that violence was not part of her repertoire.

"I was actually thinking of another way," Lily said. "One that

involves far less savagery. And it might make you look better in the eyes of everyone on board.”

After hearing Lily’s explanation, Marshall realized that the situation would still conclude with a shocking ending, even if it wasn’t with *his* plan. But the more that the former president thought about Lily’s plan, the more he realized maybe he had chosen one intelligent person for his new ‘Inner Circle’ after all.

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Wesley Maddox truly felt sorry for Patrick O’Brien, not to mention that the kid’s sob story could lead to a major power shift in his direction. But the former project leader wondered if aligning himself with O’Brien was such a great plan. The kid began to talk crazy, coming up with constant schemes to take control of the space station or one of the incoming space shuttles. Maddox wanted George Marshall to worry about the possibility of a mutiny, but realized the actual staging of a riot was far too extreme. The *threat* of upheaval was what Maddox had in mind, not the actual *occurrence* of upheaval...

But O’Brien disagreed, as he spoke about plans of action as a probability instead of a possibility. The young man’s growing desperation was dangerous, and Maddox realized that if he attempted the takeover and failed, O’Brien would face a serious punishment. Considering that many passengers now linked the two men together, Maddox worried that he could face the same final fate as O’Brien, whether Wesley participated in his crazy schemes or not.

“This is what we do,” O’Brien said as the two men met in Maddox’s room. The young man showed up at Wesley’s door at least five times a day now, four (*or even five*, Maddox thought) times more than the former project leader now wanted. “You think there will be one more shuttle arriving with passengers before the comet strike, right?”

Maddox regretted sharing *all* of his thoughts with the kid and found himself trying to disprove his old theories whenever O’Brien

mentioned them.

“I said that *might* be a possibility,” Maddox answered. “There are still many vacant pods. But maybe they’re leaving open space for more storage.”

Knowing the incredible amount of storage aboard the station, Maddox didn’t believe that for one second. What he also didn’t mention was that neither James Armour or Peter Mansfield—Marshall’s two most trusted advisors—were aboard yet. Maddox found it hard to believe the former president would not bring both of these men to the station at some point.

“When the shuttle arrives, we wait for all the passengers to disembark,” O’Brien said. “Then, we storm the airlock, get on board and demand to be returned to Earth.”

The crazed look in O’Brien’s eyes told Maddox that the young man was completely delusional. But Maddox could not stop from mentioning the skewed logic in such a flawed escape plan.

“Why would they do what you say? Even if you somehow got onto the shuttle, why would either pilot follow your orders?” Maddox asked. “There are no weapons on the station for you to steal and threaten them with, so I doubt they’d be frightened of you.”

“Just because there aren’t guns doesn’t mean there are no weapons,” O’Brien said. “Besides, the pilots won’t be following *my* orders, they’ll be following George Marshall’s orders to bring me back.”

“And why would George Marshall give that order?” Maddox asked, afraid of the answer.

“I’ll take his wife hostage,” O’Brien said.

“You’ll do *what*?” Maddox asked incredulously.

“The former First Lady,” O’Brien said. “I’ll take her hostage. I’ll force her onto the shuttle and make her take the trip back to Earth. Once they bring me home, I’ll release her and the shuttle can return to the station.”

“How do you plan on taking the First Lady with all the Marines canvassing the corridors?” Maddox asked. “You know they’re watching every move both of us make.”



“They might watch *us* at all times, but that doesn’t mean they watch *everyone* all the time,” O’Brien said.

Maddox began to have the feeling O’Brien wasn’t telling him everything. Maddox was afraid that filling the young man’s mind with thoughts of defiance was similar to opening Pandora’s box, a box Maddox wished he could put a lid back on.

“Everyone else?” he asked. “I hope you haven’t told *anyone* else about this plan. If word got back to George Marshall, we could both be branded traitors. And I’m sure you know the punishment for treason.”

“I haven’t told anybody yet,” O’Brien said. “But there are quite a few people very sympathetic to the cause.”

Maddox glanced down at his watch, as if watching the seconds of his freedom aboard the space station quickly ticking away.

“You’d better go now. It’s been an hour and the Marines might start wondering where we are,” Maddox said. “They might start to think that we’re plotting against them.”

“You’re right,” O’Brien said. “I’ll let you know if anyone wants to join us.”

Maddox hated the term ‘us,’ as he did not want to be grouped with O’Brien in any way.

“If I were you, I might think of alternative ways of getting home,” Maddox said.

“I have,” the young man said. “I don’t think there’s any other way that would work.”

Maddox realized that he could no longer control what O’Brien did or who the young man talked to. If O’Brien mentioned his awful scheme to anyone else and that information made its way back to Marshall, Maddox knew he would find himself in just as much trouble as his young accomplice.

*Sometimes you have to make the tough decision,* Maddox thought, *a lesson learned during his days leading space construction. Which means I have to swallow my pride and deal with this before it gets even worse.*

Maddox exited his pod and glanced down the corridor, where

he saw O'Brien being questioned by two Marines. The soldiers looked in Maddox's direction as did O'Brien, who nodded after they asked him something. Whatever the three were talking about, Maddox realized it was a conversation he wanted no part of.

Wesley Maddox was on his way to make everything right. He could only hope to save himself and Patrick O'Brien in the process.

# CHAPTER THIRTY

Driving in near darkness for hours helped Colin deal with the pain in his head. He slowly became accustomed to the aching once back on I-5 after escaping death. Once he was back on the highway, Colin finally took John's advice and pushed the Mach One to its breaking point, cruising in the left lane at a hundred miles per hour. Losing concentration for a single instant by dwelling on head pain could have caused an accident, one Colin wouldn't walk away from traveling at that speed. Therefore, he focused all of his attention on the road in front of him, helping forget that his head and a tire iron crossed paths.

But once the sun began to rise in the sky and the morning's first light hit him in the eyes, the pain in his head also seemed to reawaken. The only thing keeping him going was knowing his journey would soon come to an end. Having crossed over the border between Oregon and Washington a few hours earlier, Colin was getting very close.

*I just wish I knew exactly what I was getting close to,* he thought. The fear of arriving to nothingness was constantly on his mind. During the long trip, Colin tried to block out his usual skepticism and accept that he had a real chance to be saved. With so little time left on the trek, the one thing he feared most – the possibility of driving all the way back to Southern California to face his best friend if the ticket and sub didn't pan out. He knew John would never forgive himself for

waiting to give Colin the ticket.

The only good part about the pain of the morning light was Colin could hardly focus on the possible negatives awaiting him. Once his trip finally turned off Interstate-5 and onto many smaller roads, Colin concentrated on making all the turns suggested by the GPS. Colin barely had time to notice the huge Pacific Ocean on his left.

Southern California was scenic for its beautiful beaches, sunny weather and exotic palm trees, but this part of the Pacific was equally splendid for different reasons. Despite the overwhelming feeling of dreariness portrayed by the rocky outcroppings and crashing waves, there was a sense of romanticism about the scenery that Colin couldn't put into words. It was strange to see a place completely secluded from the rest of the world.

For a moment, Colin forgot where he was going, forgot that the world was coming to an end, forgot that his mind continued to pound like a jackhammer. For the first time he could remember, a wave of relaxation washed over his entire body as he stared into the emptiness around him. But when he spotted a tiny speck in the distance slowly growing into a motel as he drove closer, Colin snapped out of his reverie and realized he finally reached his destination.

The run-down hotel was literally in the middle of nowhere, no other buildings or people or signs of civilization as far as the eye could see. Adding to the journey that Colin had now finished, one word to describe the setting instantly came to mind: deserted. As he pulled the Mach One into the hotel's parking lot, Colin did not see a single car in front of the building. His stomach turned flips at the dread of being too late.

While Colin was certainly disappointed, he felt little anger that he'd come all this way for nothing. He was sure the frustration would kick in at some point but for now, the main thing he felt was curiosity. He wondered whether this submarine had just been a hoax all along, or if he missed the window of opportunity and it left already.

He turned the Mustang's engine off and opened the car door. Colin reached into the backseat and retrieved the bag of clothes that also held the silver ticket. Colin didn't have to worry about locking

the doors and didn't even remove the keys from the ignition.

The intense pain in Colin's head remained and he found himself yearning for a place to just lie down and sleep for the next twelve hours. Between the pain and his lack of rest, Colin found himself wishing the hotel was unlocked so he could have a place to sleep. The return to Southern California was going to be brutal and he dreaded the thought of driving another twenty hours without sleeping anywhere but the backseat of the Mach One.

When Colin grabbed the front door's handle, he was relieved to find the entrance offered no resistance. Upon entering the hotel's lobby, Colin was not surprised to find it empty of people. The interior was actually not in as bad shape as he expected, though it was far from elegant. Colin was surprised that there was little dust on the hotel's front desk. When he looked closely, it didn't look like there was any dust at all...

*I can see the front desk very clearly,* Colin thought, as something very important suddenly clicked in his mind. The reason he could see was because there were numerous lights shining behind the desk, as well as others lights on the ceiling of the lobby. *If this place was abandoned, the power would be shut off and there wouldn't be lights.*

Without wasting time, Colin banged on the small bell on the front desk. The loud ringing echoed in the empty room. He waited a few seconds and glanced around, as if expecting the staff to come answering the call. But the lobby remained vacant. Colin entered the nearby hallway and pounded on every door he passed, praying someone would be there to give him some answers. That was not to be and Colin didn't bother wasting his time checking the second floor.

He returned to the lobby and sat in one of the large lounge chairs by the window overlooking the parking lot. Colin could not remember sitting in any seat as comfortable as this. The disappointment of finding the hotel deserted should've crushed his spirit, but he didn't think it possible to feel upset while his body was so utterly relaxed. Even the pain in his head subsided, more a dull thudding than a sharp pain.

*I should get up and see if I can find room keys behind the desk,*

Colin thought. *I'll just rest here for a few minutes and then try that.*

Colin slumped down further in his chair until he was nearly reclined. To maximize his comfort, he pulled the small coffee table forward, kicked the old magazines to the floor and propped up his feet. A ceiling fan blew cooler air down on his face. His eyes weren't closed for more than ten seconds before he drifted into a deep sleep.

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Colin's sleep was free of dreams, a black void that produced no faraway visions or sounds...at least not right away.

It did not take long before Colin thought he heard a noise, one that started off quietly in the distance but grew louder with every passing second. After a few minutes, the sound of a sputtering engine finally leveled off, loud enough for Colin to hear but not close enough to be considered loud. By the time Colin recognized this noise was not part of his dream, his eyes snapped open and his brain woke with a start. Momentarily confused by his surroundings, the view of the front desk brought back every detail of his situation.

He turned in his chair to look at the parking lot, hoping the sputtering engine belonged to an approaching car. But the Mach One remained the only car in the lot and the road leading to the hotel was still deserted. Colin did not think he slept for longer than an hour, despite feeling refreshed. He touched the back of his skull, the golf-ball-sized lump still tender to the touch.

*Where else could it be coming from?* Colin wondered.

He stood from the chair and quickly stretched before taking up the search. Colin was convinced it had to be coming from outside.

*The ocean! Why didn't I think of this sooner?* Colin wondered. *I came all this way for a submarine but I didn't think to look in the ocean before giving up?*

When Colin opened the entrance, the noise instantly became louder. He rushed around the hotel until he had a clear view of the ocean, a view that immediately produced an answer to the noise. A small motorboat chugged its way toward the wooden docks a hundred

yards away. The boat held only one person, maybe a local fisherman. Unfortunately, the tiny boat was far from a submarine that Colin hoped would be his savior...

On his way to the docks, Colin passed a small section behind the hotel where dozens of tables and chairs were set up for a party. Even a few plastic covers adorned the tables that hadn't yet blown away. By the time Colin walked the path toward the ocean, the motorboat had reached the docks.

This man was certainly no fisherman. Dressed like an accountant and only as tall as Colin was in eighth grade, this tiny man did not look happy to see another human being.

"Who are you?" the man called out

"My name is Co..." Colin nearly let his real name slip. Unsure whether this man had anything to do with the secret submarine, he'd traveled too far to blow it now. "My name is John Fare."

"What are you doing here?" the man asked suspiciously. "How did you find this place?"

"I drove here," Colin answered. "I—"

"You should get out of here," the small man interrupted. "This is private property and we don't take kindly to trespassers."

Colin felt discouraged that the one person he found was not receptive. But it dawned on him that this might indeed be a good sign. The tiny man seemed to be hiding something and Colin could think of no better reason to act so mysteriously than if there was some sort of secret involved.

Colin simply blurted out exactly what was on his mind.

"I'm here for the submarine," he said.

The tiny man looked behind him at the ocean.

"Please forget what you saw," the small man said. "That submarine is property of the U.S. government, nothing more. We are currently running tests and aren't going to let some kid interfere."

Colin glanced around, expecting other people to be there for this testing if this was true. Colin highly doubted that the government would run such tests from a hotel in the middle of nowhere. It was obvious this man was lying.

"I don't believe you," Colin said.

"I don't care what you believe," the tiny man said. "It's the truth. Unless you get out of here now, I'll be forced to call my backup to escort you off of the premises."

Colin was getting nowhere with this man, so he did the only thing he could think of. He took his bag from his shoulder and unzipped it.

"Before you think about pulling out a weapon, you should know we're being watched right now," the small man said.

When Colin found what he was looking for, he took it out and pointed it in the small man's direction.

"Where did you get that?" he asked, the shock in his voice suddenly softening his accusatory tone.

"My father," Colin said, as he handed the silver ticket to the man on the boat. "He gave this to me and told me to come here so I could get aboard some kind of secret submarine."

The tiny man opened the ticket and clearly recognized it. When he looked back up at Colin, he was much friendlier than before.

"We were wondering if you were going to arrive," the tiny man said. "My name is Marc Hudson, special assistant to Tyler Ainsworth. Please hold on a minute, I'll radio the seacraft."

The assistant took a walkie-talkie from his jacket pocket and spoke into it.

"You're very lucky. Mr. Ainsworth has agreed to raise the seacraft and allow you to come on board," Marc said. "Your timing is impeccable. The seacraft was just about to leave."

The next few minutes were quite surreal for Colin, as the sub rose out of the water, larger than he ever thought possible. It looked more like a floating skyscraper than an underwater vehicle.

"Impressive, isn't it?" Marc asked.

"I never knew submarines were so huge," Colin said, his voice barely louder than a whisper.

"It's actually an underwater seacraft, not a sub," Marc explained. "But if you're impressed now, wait until you see the boat's interior, especially where you'll be staying."



“I can’t wait,” Colin said, although he was hard-pressed to imagine how anything could be more impressive than the sheer size of it.

“I think the motorboat is out of gas,” Marc said, as he unsuccessfully tried to start the engine a few times. “I’ll be right back. There’s a shed up there with drums of gasoline.”

Once the boat was refueled and the engine started, Colin grabbed his bag and climbed aboard, feeling unsteady for his first ever trip aboard any type of boat. He sat on one of the small wooden benches but still found his balance wavering, as he hoped his stability on the larger seacraft would be better.

After the short boat ride across the choppy Pacific Ocean, Colin was glad when they finally reached the seacraft, which was more impressive up close. As they approached the aft of the stern, Colin suddenly wondered how he’d get inside. Every submarine he ever saw on TV had its hatch at the top of the hull. He hoped there wasn’t some sort of ladder to climb to the top. He never thought of himself as afraid of heights, but because Colin was never on top of something as high as the seacraft.

“How do I get in?” he yelled over the whine of the motorboat’s engine and crashing waves.

“They will open the door any moment,” Marc said, pointing toward the rear section of the boat. As Marc predicted, a small door just above water the water level seemingly opened out of nowhere. Another small man appeared in the doorway and waved to them. Marc steered the boat in that direction and they slowly drifted over. When they were right beside the door, the other man lowered a small plank, which Marc grabbed and connected to the motorboat.

“Nigel will show you aboard,” Marc said. “Please be careful stepping across.”

“Aren’t you coming?” Colin asked.

“I have another job to handle first,” Marc said, giving no further explanation of that particular job. “You’ll have to hurry and get on board. The seacraft’s launch has already been postponed for your arrival.”

Colin picked up his bag and carefully crossed the plank. The other man extended his hand to Colin to help keep him balanced. Colin was glad to climb through the door. Colin was in a room no larger than a closet, though there was another nearby door and a narrow hallway swarming with people just beyond. These passengers looked like ordinary folks, but Colin noticed that they all seemed to have one thing in common: they were looking directly at him.

*Everyone here knows that I'm holding up their trip*, he thought, blushing.

Colin forced an uncomfortable smile before turning back to the smaller man who helped him on board. But this man paid no attention to Colin and was in the middle of a conversation with the driver of the motorboat, a conversation he couldn't help overhearing.

"Why didn't you tell me you were leaving?" Nigel asked, pulling the plank back aboard the seacraft.

"I knew you'd freak out about it, like you're doing now," Marc called back. "Don't worry, it's only for the week of government testing."

"Tyler never told me that someone had to stay behind," Nigel said.

"Tyler doesn't tell you a lot of things," Marc said. "Probably because he knows you worry too much."

"You should be the one worried," Nigel said. "Do you still have the letter I gave you?"

"Tyler needs me aboard, I have nothing to worry about," Marc said. "Besides, I'll be in constant contact with Admiral Matthews and Tyler."

*"Do you still have my letter?"* Nigel repeated.

"Yes," Marc answered. "I've been doing what you told me to do. I keep it on me at all times."

"Make sure you don't lose it," Nigel said, as he began to close the heavy door.

"I'll see you in a week," Marc yelled.

Nigel stopped closing the door and looked out at him.

"Good luck," Nigel said. "You'll probably need it."

With that, Nigel closed the door. Colin did not know what their conversation was all about, but it sounded serious. When Nigel turned and looked at Colin, he looked almost embarrassed, as if he hadn't realized anyone was standing behind him. Colin extended his hand.

"My name's John Fare," Colin said. "It's nice to meet you."

Nigel looked suspiciously at Colin and did not accept the handshake.

"Do you work for the government?" the smaller man asked.

Colin was taken aback by such a strange question and figured this was Nigel's attempt at humor. But when Colin forced a chuckle and Nigel continued to look serious, he realized it was no joke.

"I'm only seventeen," Colin answered. He suddenly remembered that John was actually eighteen now and wondered what these people knew about his friend. "Err...actually, I just turned eighteen a few months ago."

"That's not what I asked you," Nigel said.

"I'm still in high school," Colin replied.

"Still not what I asked you."

"No, I don't work for the government," Colin said. "My father bought this ticket and gave it to me. Marc told me there wouldn't be any problems about coming aboard."

"I doubt Marc will be with us any longer," Nigel said.

"He told me he'd be back in a week," Colin said.

Nigel simply shook his head.

"Follow me," Nigel said, as walked out of the small room. Once Colin exited the room, Nigel closed the door behind him and locked it shut, tucking a key into his pocket. At this point, Colin read the sign on the outside of the door: CAUTION. DO NOT ENTER. AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY.

Nigel walked along the corridor, saying nothing to the people he passed. The other passengers stared at him but said nothing.

The hallways were very cramped and when Colin walked by a few open doors, he noticed that the rooms were also very small, especially since several people lived in each one.

"Should I search his bag?" a large man clad in military garb

asked.

"I don't think that's necessary," Nigel answered. "He is one of Mr. Ainsworth's guests. I'm sure he knows full well that bringing a weapon aboard would lead to his automatic expulsion."

Until that moment, Colin completely forgot what was in his bag. But suddenly, he remembered placing Mr. Fare's gun into the bag now slung over his shoulder. Colin felt his face suddenly burn and a trickle of sweat form on his forehead. As the large military man looked down at him, Colin had no doubt his face had to be blossoming into a deep—and guilty—shade of crimson.

"You didn't bring any weapons on board, did you?" the man asked, his strangely feminine voice still very threatening.

Colin felt the urge to come clean and explain why he had the gun in his possession. But bringing a weapon was obviously a major no-no stressed to the passengers and breaking this cardinal rule would lead to more suspicion of his true identity. By delaying the seacraft's launch, he'd already placed a big "look at me" sign on his own back. If they found out he was not really John Fare, they would probably rise to the ocean's surface and set him adrift.

"I only have clothes in my bag," he said. "I heard enough warnings about what would happen to anyone who tried sneaking in a weapon."

Without another word, the military man nodded and turned away. Colin continued following Nigel. They twisted and turned through numerous corridors until reaching another door with a warning sign. It felt to Colin like they'd walked in one large circle and ended up back where they started, but Nigel did not need a key for this door. They entered a stairwell and Nigel climbed the steps.

"How many levels are there in this place?" Colin asked.

"Only two," Nigel said, as he continued to lead his way up.

"Just two?" Colin wondered. "Seems like with the ceilings so low, there should be at least four or five."

"The ceilings aren't as low on the upper level," Nigel answered. "The upper level is a bit nicer."

"Are you sure I'm supposed to be in the nicer section of the

submarine?”

“With the amount of money your father paid Tyler Ainsworth,” Nigel said, “you should be in the *niciest* section.”

# CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

“We can not sit back and argue with one another any longer,” said the British Prime Minister, the delegate from England. “This is not about *who* will save the world, *who* will get the credit for coming up with the best idea. When future history books are written, they will not say England or America or China or Russia or Spain or France or any *one* country was responsible for stopping this deadly comet. They will say that *humanity* was responsible, that humanity banded together in an unprecedented way and fought together to stop this problem. If we continue to bicker, we will have waited too long and this comet will have destroyed us all. And then *none* of us will have to worry about a history book ever being written again.”

When the Prime Minister was done giving his fiery speech, President Andrew Brighton and many other English-speaking delegates in attendance voiced their approval of the PM’s message. Of course Brighton knew there was no chance of the comet being stopped. But coming way to Geneva, Switzerland for this meeting of world leaders was one of the duties he still had to fulfill as President of the United States. And as the delegate from America, Brighton knew it was his responsibility to agree with everything American allies said.

Every major world leader was present at the Palais des Nations, the United Nation’s headquarters in Switzerland. It was this large council’s duty to agree upon the world’s final plan to combat the

impending comet strike. This meeting was supposed to be held at the main United Nations headquarters in New York City, but many nations that resisted joining the UN—countries such as China—refused to travel to America, a site that they'd claimed would be 'culturally biased against any input they might have due to political strain between countries.' At a time when countries like America and England and even Russia had publicly stated that all political disputes were on hold because of Comet Clement, some nations still refused to forget problems they had with other countries. Brighton and other peace-seeking nations agreed to move the meeting to Switzerland, hoping this olive branch offering would be viewed as a sign for other countries that working together was the one goal they all must attain.

But while some of the countries accepted this olive branch by showing up to Switzerland, it didn't take long for the meeting to turn ugly. Within the first hour, a number of nations had moved away from discussions of saving the world and gone back to petty squabbling that often plagued international meetings.

*This must've been exactly what George Marshall and the 'Inner Circle' expected to happen, Brighton thought. No wonder they didn't include the rest of the world leaders sooner.*

With the room finally calm, the Secretary-General of the United Nations finally addressed the assembly.

"We must do everything possible to stop this comet," she said. "And we must figure this plan out as soon as possible. Time is working against us and if we are to stop this raging bull of a comet, we must act now."

Without further ado, the Secretary-General introduced the first astronomical expert. A space engineering expert from Australia, Logan Franklin looked more like a professional surfer than a man about to address every major world political leader. With bleached blond curls and the bronzed tan of a person always in the sun, Franklin did not look like the type of person who spent his days working in a laboratory.

"I'm not sure anything is going to stop this comet from striking Earth," Franklin said in his thick Australian accent. It was certainly an

interesting way to start his speech and undoubtedly got the attention of every person in the Assembly Hall. “I don’t think it’s fair to be misleading. With apologies to the British Prime Minister and the UN’s Secretary-General, I have to say that working together in a peaceful manner does not mean we will be able to stop Clement. In fact, if every country in the world joined forces and put one unified plan into action, the chances would still remain strong that the plan would fail and Comet Clement will destroy Earth on August 22.”

The Australian’s blunt honesty and stark pessimism caused loud chatter among the world leaders.

“This is not helping us,” the British Prime Minister said. “We need experts with real plans about how to stop the comet, not naysayers who aren’t interested in helping.”

Many others in the room voiced their agreement with the PM, but Brighton remained silently seated, knowing the Australian had spoken the truth. Pointing out fact accomplished nothing productive, but Franklin was not the least bit deterred by the tongue-lashing from the most important man in England.

“I might be pessimistic, but years of scientific study teaches that if there’s evidence that something is impossible, then it is indeed impossible. I call this being realistic, but that doesn’t mean I’m not here to help,” Franklin said. “In fact, the astronomical community has agreed that my suggestion for Comet Clement has the greatest chance of success, even if that chance does not have as high a probability as we’d hope for.”

Over the course of the next hour, Franklin provided an in-depth explanation of the possible ways of stopping the comet strike. The two main methods—destruction or deflection—had both been explained on every newscast across the globe, but the Australian pointed out why neither option was currently the best choice. Trying to destroy the comet might prove somewhat successful. With enough firepower (i.e. enough nuclear weaponry) detonated on the surface of the comet, they could probably blow the comet apart. But the problem was that blowing up one huge comet would create hundreds or thousands of smaller comets, all of which would continue on the same path to



Earth.

“If you asked 100 astronomers whether the world would be better if struck by one large comet or thousands of smaller ones, I’d venture to guess that all 100 would agree on one answer,” Franklin said. “The answer is that it doesn’t matter because both scenarios would cause equal amounts of damage.”

The deflection option, explained the Australian, was still probably the best plan. Franklin launched into a lengthy narration about mathematical equations that indicated the amount of pressure required to push the comet and about how much time was needed for the comet to move off its current path. Brighton felt like he was in an advanced math class that he knew nothing about. As he glanced around at many other delegates, the president recognized similar looks of confusion and puzzlement. The Australian must’ve sensed he was losing the crowd.

“According to our numbers—many of which are purely hypothetical due to our lack of knowledge about the weight, density, chemical composition and gravitational pull of the comet—we’ve come to the conclusion that a nuclear weapon could be detonated approximately half a mile from the surface of Clement and provide enough energy to push the comet off its current track,” Franklin explained. “The only unfortunate part of this plan is the limited time constraints.”

The British Prime Minister pushed aside UN formalities and turned this meeting into more of a panel discussion. Although most of the other world leaders adhered to the UN policies and kept quiet while others had the floor, the PM had no time for formalities.

“What time constraints? If this plan has the best chance of working, we can band together and have something ready to go by tomorrow,” he said enthusiastically. The Australian did not appear impressed.

“Even if we started tomorrow, that would not give us enough time,” Logan Franklin said, instantly deflating the Prime Minister’s enthusiasm.

“Surely you couldn’t expect us to load a nuclear weapon into a

rocket and fire it into space *today*,” the Brit said.

The Australian again shook his head.

“That *still* would not give us enough time. Any rocket would have to make an incredibly lengthy journey to the comet before exploding. But even if that rocket was right next to Clement at this moment, a nuclear explosion would still not be powerful enough to push the comet off course in the next few months,” Franklin explained. “According to our calculations, someone would’ve had to launch a rocket off Earth ten years ago to maximize the chances of deflection. That would’ve given a nuke enough time to reach the target, detonate and allow the required energy sufficient time to gradually push the comet off target over the span of many years. But even if that still *had happened* years ago, there would be no guarantee of success.”

“Do you have any plans that *don’t require* using a time machine?” the Prime Minister asked. “Because I sincerely hope you didn’t waste an hour of our precious time on theories that could’ve been useful ten years ago.”

“I apologize for any confusion, Mr. Prime Minister, but I was using that example as a precursor to my plan,” Franklin explained.

“Then stop delaying and just tell us already,” the PM said.

“My plan is best described as a domino deflection,” Franklin said. “Let me explain something first. Some of you might be thinking, *why don’t we just explode more nukes by the comet to provide the force necessary to push the comet farther off course?* The answer to that is simple: if too much energy is generated by detonating multiple nukes, the energy becomes too great and serves as more of a destructive force than a deflective force. We don’t even know for sure how much energy *is too much*. We think the explosive power of a single nuclear weapon—or approximately 2-4 megatons of TNT—is the most energy a comet could absorb before it begins to break down.

“So I propose that we begin firing rockets into space every couple of days until the comet is due to strike. The domino effect will begin to occur once the first rocket and nuke arrive at the comet. Following the first explosion, the comet will be pushed just slightly off

course, maybe just a few centimeters per hour. A few days later, when the second nuke arrives and explodes, the comet will be pushed a bit more. This will continue at least fifteen to twenty times, and we will have to pray this will be enough to push Clement far enough off track.

“I wish I could stand in front of you today and dazzle you with numbers about how this plan is foolproof, about how this plan is the way to save the world from disaster,” Logan Franklin explained. “But I don’t have those numbers because they don’t exist. What I *could* do now is stand here and list all the reasons why this plan won’t work: the limited time we have, the limited resources, our lack of overall knowledge. There’s no telling the effects of the comet following the absorption of such high doses of energy. Unfortunately, the time for asking questions is long gone. It is time to act and act decisively, which is why I strongly recommend this course of action be taken right away. Thank you for your time.”

Brighton was impressed with the Australian’s presentation. The combination of brutal honesty and creative thinking made his plans a serious consideration for the nations to ponder. The president wondered how accurate the science of Franklin’s explanation was and whether this plan could’ve worked had the ‘Inner Circle’ put it to use years ago. He remembered George Marshall explaining that they had succeeded in pushing the comet slightly off-course, but not enough to avoid a collision with Earth.

In his mind, he often questioned the judgment of George Marshall, Peter Mansfield and James Armour in keeping the comet a secret for so long, especially since they operated with limited resources. Had they made this information known to the public years ago, there was no telling how the countries of the world could’ve rallied together and come up with a plan.

But that was in the past and Brighton knew it was a waste of his time to dwell on what the ‘Inner Circle’ had done—or in this case, what they *hadn’t* done. The Secretary-General introduced the next expert on the subject, a man from China named Liu Ming. Because this man only spoke Chinese, the president picked up the headphones and listened as a translator interpreted what Liu Ming said.

“The data we have collected over the years about comets does not match what you were told earlier by Mr. Franklin,” Ming said defiantly. “We think he is wrong and that his data is inaccurate.”

Brighton listened over the next five minutes as Ming ripped apart everything the Australian told them. The gist of Ming’s presentation involved the use of two nuclear weapons, the first to destroy the comet and the second one to deflect the thousands of smaller comets off course. Ming argued that once the larger Comet Clement was destroyed, its gravitational pull would weaken to the point where a second nuclear explosion could push the rest of the debris away. Again, this sounded like a good plan to Brighton if it could work, but he wasn’t sure whether the information Ming presented was fully accurate itself. Logan Franklin shook his head in obvious frustration the entire time the Chinese expert spoke. The Australian clearly disagreed with everything Ming said.

Halfway through Ming’s presentation, Brighton was surprised when he felt a vibration in his pocket. He carried a cell phone with him at all times, a phone whose number was known by only James Armour and Peter Mansfield. Since both men knew full well that he would be in this meeting all day, the only reason either one of them would call was with important news Brighton needed to know right away. When he looked at the caller ID, he saw it was Armour, who was back at mission control and in constant communication with George Marshall. Although Marshall usually had nothing of consequence to report, Brighton did not want to hesitate now if there was the chance that something had happened.

When the American President looked to his right and two rows back, he saw Russian President Aleksandr Metachenko—the only world leader the ‘Inner Circle’ told about Clement from the start—looking in his direction. Metachenko must’ve noticed the concern on Brighton’s face. He made a gesture with his head indicating that Brighton should excuse himself and leave the Assembly Hall for a moment. Brighton nodded, took off his headphones and did just that.

Neither Metachenko nor Brighton knew that there was another pair of eyes watching their silent communication.

Although it was normal during UN sessions for people to come in and out of the large hall, Brighton received many looks from those world leaders around him. Luckily, Brighton's departure did not interrupt the Chinese expert, who continued to speak of his plans.

# CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Once in the empty hallway of the Assembly Hall, Brighton took out his phone.

“Mr. President Brighton, I hope all is well,” Russian President Metachenko said as he emerged from the Assembly Hall. “I wanted to make sure there was not a problem I could help with.”

“James Armour is probably trying to give me an update about the space station.”

“Ah, the American astronaut hero James Armour,” Metachenko said, the Russian’s eyes lighting up like a ten year-old speaking about his favorite baseball player. “I was very happy to hear that Mr. Armour would join in our establishment in the Ural Mountains. My people will be quite excited to have an American celebrity living among them.”

“What am I, chopped liver?” Brighton asked.

The president meant this as a joke, but Metachenko appeared confused by his meaning.

“I do not know this term, chopped liver,” the Russian said.

“Am I not popular enough for them to get excited?”

Metachenko’s confusion turned to amusement when he figured out Brighton’s joke. The large man let out a bellow of a laugh and clapped Brighton on the shoulder.

“Of course they will be impressed to see you as well,” Metachenko said. “I was also pleased to hear that you and your lovely

young family will live in our underground bunker. You will not be disappointed with your living quarters or our facility, that I can promise you.”

“I’ve seen quite a few photographs and I have to say it looks amazing, no doubt the best place for my family during this traumatic time,” Brighton said. “My wife Katina and my son AJ are looking forward to arriving as much as I am.”

Metachenko nodded proudly, undoubtedly pleased with the praise.

“It will not be much longer,” Metachenko said.

“Who knows? Maybe we will get lucky and avoid ever having to use either of our arks,” Brighton said hopefully. “Listening to some of these experts is making me believe there is a possibility of stopping Clement.”

Metachenko looked confused again momentarily, but then broke out into more laughter.

“I understand, you are making another joke,” the Russian said. “I did not know you were such a funny man.”

Brighton had been serious but based upon the Russian president’s reaction, he knew Metachenko did not believe Earth had a chance to be saved.

“You don’t think any of these plans could work?” Brighton asked.

“I do not,” Metachenko said. “George Marshall and his men could not find another way, my Russian experts could not find another way. And that was when we had many years, not a few weeks. I wish circumstances were different, but they are not.”

While the presidents of Russia and the United States spoke, the man who’d been watching both of them suddenly appeared behind both men. He moved quietly and gracefully, completely undetected. Had his goal been to spy on the conversation, Brighton or Metachenko never would have known he was there. But Lu Chun had another reason for confronting the two men.

“When it came time for the expert from China to take the stage, the leaders from both Russia and the United States left in the middle

of his presentation?” Chun asked. The small Chinese man spoke English with an elegance that Brighton heard from few Americans, but Chun sounded refined to the point of snobbery. “If either of your countries contained a single expert on the subject worthy of such a meeting, I doubt either one of you would’ve appreciated if I so rudely left during the middle of their speech.”

Former Minister of Foreign Affairs Lu Chun had become president of China two years earlier when former President Sun-Li passed away. Chun was the first Chinese president truly cultured in the ways of the Western World. He spoke flawless English, had a great understanding of capitalism and even lived in New York City for two years in his younger days. But his knowledge of the American way of life did not equal a respect for it. Brighton had no contact with Lu Chun during the past two years, but was well aware of the Chinese president’s disdain for the United States. Brighton was also aware that Lu Chun did not mind bashing America or Russia in the international media whenever possible.

Had Lu Chun been president of China during George Marshall’s administration, there was little doubt the tension between America and China would have been as high as the tension between Russia and China. Brighton had heard the story about Marshall’s trip to China, a trip during which the former president planned to tell Sun-Li about Comet Clement. But Sun-Li blew off the meeting, assigning Lu Chun to take his place. Marshall described the extremely chilly reception he received from Lu Chun and Prime Minister Qui Song Mau, an older gentleman who’d undoubtedly been instructed by Chun to treat the American President with as much disdain as possible. That meeting between heads of state accomplished nothing but to make Lu Chun one of the unspoken enemies of the United States.

Although Andrew Brighton never questioned Marshall’s portrayal of Lu Chun as being despicable, the current president never figured that the Chinese president was as bad as Marshall described. Yet now that Brighton could see the man’s smugness up close, he was beginning to understand why Marshall hated Lu Chun so much.

“I meant no disrespect by leaving, especially none to your



expert or your country,” Brighton said, attempting to remain cordial.

“Yet your actions suggest otherwise,” Chun said. “Not to mention the actions of your lapdog Russian friend, who seems to follow the American lead whenever the opportunity arises.”

Regardless of the size difference between the Russian and Chinese president, Lu Chun showed no fear despite Metachenko’s ability to squash him like a bug with ease. Even though the huge Russian looked like he had been in a fight or two during his lifetime, Metachenko resisted the urge to take Chun’s bait. The Russian merely smiled, even if his gaze tried to bore holes through the smaller man.

“President Chun, our countries have coexisted peacefully since you took office,” Metachenko said, following Brighton’s lead of geniality. “Why would you make such an unkind remark at a time when there are far greater concerns facing the world?”

“If the People’s Republic had not been so focused on completing our space station and trying to create a solution to solve this comet crisis, *dealing with Russia* would have been much higher on my list of priorities,” Chun replied acidly.

“Alas, international problems will have to wait for the next few months,” Brighton interceded, trying to calm the brewing storm. “And I think all three of us look forward to the idea of a world being here to continue arguing over one day.”

Neither Metachenko nor Chun glanced in Brighton’s direction as the American President spoke, both men staring at each other with intense hatred.

“The way you two were speaking before I interrupted, it seems like you both agree that Earth’s destruction is a foregone conclusion,” Chun said. “I wonder why you would think this way when this meeting today is trying to solve our common problem.”

“In times like these, it is wisest to plan for the worst,” Brighton said. “While we pray for the best, we must expect the worst.”

Finally, Chun broke eye contact with his Russian nemesis and looked at Brighton, a smugness in his gaze that made Brighton feel very uneasy.

“I must agree with you on that point, Mr. Brighton,” Chun said.

“If this comet does strike, I feel content knowing that the space station built by the People’s Republic is far superior to any space station ever assembled. No space outpost ever built could hope to equal our security and defense systems.”

The Chinese started building their own space station soon after the United States began their construction. While the U.S. continued their construction like business as usual, China turned it into their own space race, a battle of nationalistic pride that pushed their workers to make up as much ground on their American enemy as possible. The original Chinese station design was significantly more brazen than the one created by *McNalley & Jones*, but Chinese leadership’s insistence on speedy building quickly led to unsafe working conditions. Though China made a great deal of progress during their first year in space, it came at a steep cost. More than a dozen workers were killed in that first year alone in an array of different accidents.

With their limited supply of space construction workers dwindling at an alarmingly high rate, the Chinese were forced to shut down construction for nearly a year as modifications were made to the construction model. Working with what they already completed, the Chinese cut the size of their design in half and made their model more basic than the American model. Around this time, the Chinese put a halt to their fierce public challenge of a space race with the United States and concentrated on making sure their station got built correctly. Unfortunately for the U.S., the work completed by the Chinese remained mostly a mystery, as satellite photos showed quite a number of unexplainable attachments to China’s station, attachments that some experts identified as possible sources of weaponry.

And with Lu Chun’s current arrogance, Brighton began to think that the Chinese had a secondary use of their space station besides simply a bunker for survival. But that was an issue for another day. The longer Brighton allowed the Chinese president to stand there and make insidious insinuations, the longer it would be until he found out what James Armour needed to tell him.

“President Chun, I’m glad China and America have completed

their respective space stations, just in case nothing can be done to stop Comet Clement,” Brighton said. “It will be good to know that more people will have the opportunity to survive and continue humankind.”

“The Chinese people have endured many hardships over the years and have always come out on top,” Chun said. “I have no doubt that *my* people will once again see the Earth, though I can’t say the same for either of you. Good day, gentlemen.”

Brighton and Metachenko watched as Lu Chun walked down the corridor and reentered the Assembly Hall.

“I sometimes wonder if I should have taken care of China when I had the chance,” Metachenko said. “Lu Chun is a dangerous man.”

“The comet is infinitely more dangerous and that must be our focus,” Brighton said. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I need to call James Armour so I can return to the meeting as soon as I can.”

“You are right,” Metachenko said, again clasp Brighton on the shoulder in a friendly gesture. “We will speak again before these meetings conclude.”

Brighton pushed the preset speed dial number in his cell phone and soon spoke with James Armour.

“I’m sorry for interrupting you at the comet meetings, but I had something important to pass along.”

“I know you wouldn’t call unless it was vital,” President Brighton said. “Some news from the space station?”

“I just spoke with George Marshall and he had some disturbing news to pass along about a potential problem aboard the station.”

“Don’t tell me anything broke,” Brighton said.

Brighton’s biggest fear was a major crisis aboard the station in the final days leading to the comet strike. If there was any sort of serious damage to the station, not only would the loss of lives be a huge blow to the country’s morale, but there would not be enough time remaining for repairs to be completed.

“Nothing like that,” Armour said. “But this situation could be just as delicate.”

Armour explained everything George Marshall told him. While the ‘Inner Circle’ expected to face some trouble with upset passengers

about being deceived, they hoped no sort of violence would come about.

They certainly didn't expect a plot to kidnap the former First Lady and hijack a space shuttle.

"I imagine George wants to handle this situation in a way that will make the passengers think twice about crossing him," Brighton said. "And if he decides to dispense punishment in the harshest manner possible, I don't think any of us would question his decision."

"The former president considered treating these two schemers as treasonous," Armour explained. "But he feels sympathy for the young man, despite his traitorous plans. In fact, he's come up with an alternate way of quashing this problem."

Armour further illustrated George Marshall's plan, and exactly what the former president needed from them to alleviate the situation. Even though Marshall found himself in a high-pressure predicament, he still kept his head and tried to do what was right rather than what he thought would send the harshest message.

"Tell George I'll make the call," Brighton said, before hanging up the phone.

The American President was away from the UN meeting for nearly half an hour, long enough so others would certainly notice his delayed absence. He quickly made the next call and relayed Marshall's new orders.

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Peter Mansfield did not often find himself face to face with someone smarter than him. But as much as he hated to admit it, that was how he felt sitting across from Dr. Christopher Fratanoro. The man's office was a virtual history museum, filled with historical relics and pictures of everything from the ancient Egyptians to Napoleon Bonaparte to the United States Civil War.

"So you've determined there is zero chance the world will avoid this disaster?" Fratanoro asked Mansfield.

"That's correct," Mansfield said.

“Then why the charade of this international meeting trying to figure out a way to stop the comet?” Fratantoro asked. “Why bother wasting the time of every important international leader?”

“Because not everyone knows how bleak the situation is,” Mansfield said.

“They should,” Fratantoro answered. “The experts on television have been saying for weeks that the comet can’t be stopped. I’ve even done research into the subject and while astronomy isn’t my field of expertise, it didn’t take long to realize Earth was short of options.”

Technically, Christopher Fratantoro’s expertise was ancient history, as he was a professor at one of the country’s most prestigious Ivy League universities. Only a few months beyond the age of thirty, he was the youngest tenured professor on the entire campus. Even though his academic credentials spoke for themselves—Fratantoro graduated high school at age 14, graduated college at 17, received his doctorate at 19—there were plenty of other intelligent people across the country that Peter Mansfield could’ve chosen as the space station’s historian. Fortunately for this history professor, Fratantoro carried a label no other person did: America’s Smartest Person.

Less than a year earlier, one of the television networks created a new reality show called *Twenty-Five Questions*. A two-month long show, *Questions* took sixty-four of the country’s smartest men and women and placed them in a tournament style competition to determine America’s most intelligent individual. Although he was one of the youngest people to participate in the event, Fratantoro easily defeated the five opponents placed in front of him to gain the crown of America’s Smartest Person—not to mention the five-million dollar prize.

A cultural phenomenon, *Twenty-Five Questions* took America by storm and received some of the highest network ratings in years. The show proved a success across the globe as well. Within months, Fratantoro went from being a little known college professor to a major celebrity. He had multiple offers for appearances on television shows—not to mention book deals and endorsement proposals—but taking time away from teaching could have resulted in having his tenure

pulled. And Fratanoro wanted to remain a college professor. His motivation for appearing on the show had not been to gain celebrity; it was simply to test himself intellectually against America's brightest minds.

"I guess I won't be participating in *Twenty-Five Questions: The World Edition*," the professor said. "But now I wonder why you've come here today, Mr. Mansfield. Surely you'd be more interested in speaking with one of our astronomy professors."

"My interest has nothing to do with stopping the comet," Mansfield said. "I'm here to offer you one of the remaining spots on board the space station."

The history professor seemed confused.

"Why me?" Dr. Fratanoro wondered.

Mansfield went on to explain why the professor was an ideal candidate due to his age and lack of close bonds; Fratanoro was still single and had no close family.

"We must assume that the comet is going to destroy Earth and all accounts of history so we've decided we'll need someone aboard the station to act as a world historian," Mansfield said. "You already fit so many of the qualities we are looking for."

Fratantoro was blown away by the offer and silently mulled it over.

"I never thought that silly television show would save my life," Dr. Fratanoro said.

"It didn't," Mansfield said. "Your intelligence and knowledge did."

"Why am I needed?" he asked. "You must realize all the information I have in my brain could very easily fit onto a few discs. There are plenty of encyclopedias and history books that can be stored aboard the space station for future use."

Mansfield nodded his head.

"You're correct and many of these informational discs are already in storage," Mansfield explained. "These discs will be of use during the time spent aboard the station - which has computers in every pod and every room - but you must imagine what the world will

be like after the comet strikes. There's no telling how many years we'll have to live in space before Earth's surface becomes hospitable again. And when we do return, I don't think there'll be too many computers left to play those discs. The technology we take for granted today will become a thing of the past. The Earth we'll live the remainder of our days in will be as primitive as the caveman days."

"You paint a bleak picture of the future," Fratantoro said.

"I believe that I have every right to do so," Mansfield said. "But while our children and our children's children may never grow up in a world as sophisticated as ours, it's vital that Earth's history is never forgotten."

"Which is where I come in," Fratantoro realized, figuring out why he was needed.

"How was history passed along through hundreds of generations before printed presses or computers?" Mansfield asked. "Word of mouth. The first ever history teachers made sure to pound this information into the brains of the youth to make sure it was never forgotten. And since you happen to be a well-respected history expert, you were an obvious choice to play this role for humankind."

"I'm speechless," Fratantoro said. Winning the title of 'America's Smartest Man' had been a huge boost for his ego, but that would never compare with what Fratantoro was now offered.

"Just think how angry King Tut would be if somebody accidentally lost the CD on Ancient Egypt."

Both men shared a laugh, but Mansfield's chuckle was cut short when he felt the cell phone vibrating in his pocket. The only two people with this number were James Armour and President Andrew Brighton. Mansfield knew if either man was calling him, there must be some important information to be passed along.

"I'd be honored to accept your invitation," Fratantoro said.

"We leave in five minutes," Mansfield said as he quickly walked out of the professor's office, surprising Dr. Fratantoro with his abruptness.

Once Mansfield reached the hallway, he was relieved to find nobody around. He quickly glanced at the cell's caller ID before

flipping open the phone.

“Mr. President? Is everything okay?” Mansfield asked.

“Yes, the meetings are proceeding as expected. But I just received a call from James Armour that requires immediate attention,” Brighton said.

“Are you sure you can speak now?” Mansfield asked. “Perhaps Armour should have called me directly without bothering you.”

“It’s okay, I’ve taken a break from the meeting. This thing has been going on for hours,” the president said. “Besides, James thought it best to confer with me first before informing you of the situation.”

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After sitting alone in his office for a long moment, Dr. Fratanoro realized he didn’t know what he could or couldn’t bring. He emptied his leather messenger bag of his normal junk and began to fill it with important books he found on the shelves around his office. It didn’t take long until his bag was completely filled and he was forced to begin making substitutions. By the time he had it right, Fratanoro decided the longer he stayed in his office, the more time he’d spend second-guessing his choices. To avoid that, he left the room.

“I understand, Mr. President,” Peter Mansfield said before closing his cell phone. “Are you ready to go?”

“Will I be allowed to return to my apartment to gather clothes?” Fratanoro asked.

Mansfield glanced down at his watch and regrettably shook his head.

“I’m sorry, but my schedule has changed and there won’t be time for that,” Mansfield said. “Don’t worry, we will provide anything you’ll need. Please come with me.”

Upon walking out of the staff building, the two men were met by three men dressed in military uniforms. Mansfield and one of the military men walked ahead of the others.

“That shouldn’t be too far out of our scheduled flight pattern,”



the soldier responded. "I'll call ahead and inform the pilot of the flight change."

The rest of the day seemed to pass slowly for Dr. Fratanoro. Upon entering a large military jeep, the men took a short ride to a local airport, where the jeep drove to a private launch pad where a large military helicopter waited. The jeep circled the huge chopper and drove up a plank, finally stopping inside the large storage bay. The men got out of the jeep and Mansfield led Fratanoro to the small passenger section, where the doctor spent the rest of his day.

The chopper was in the air soon after, landing briefly a few hours later at an army base to refuel. Mansfield was in and out of the passenger section during their flight, on his phone most of the time, leaving Fratanoro little time to ask questions about where they were going. When they finally landed at another airport later in the day, he was left alone in the chopper with the pilot, while Mansfield and the soldiers left aboard their jeep.

Fratantoro passed this time by reading and the jeep reappeared a few hours later. Moments after Mansfield and a young woman showed up in the passenger section, the helicopter lifted off and continued on the journey, its final destination not known to him. During the flight, he thought of questioning Mansfield, but he seemed distracted by numerous phone calls. Fratanoro was tempted to speak to the pretty young woman, but she appeared in a state of total shock. The doctor wondered what her role aboard the space station would be, but figured now probably wasn't the best time to ask. Tears continued to flow down her face, the impromptu exit from her normal life undoubtedly the reason she was so upset. Fratanoro knew that if he had left any family behind, he would be just as upset as this young woman.

When Fratanoro finally felt the helicopter descend from the clouds, he saw only desert below. The doctor wondered whether they reached their destination or were simply here to pick up another passenger.

"This is your last stop," Mansfield said as he pointed to several military hangars nearby.

# CHAPTER

# THIRTY-THREE

Colin McKay followed Nigel Huffington as the shorter man directed him up the steps leading from the lower to the upper level of the seacraft. With how confusing the maze of hallways was on the lower level, Colin wanted to make sure he did not lose Nigel on the second floor, which he expected to be as puzzling as the first.

Expecting the corridors to be as tiny and narrow as on the lower level, Colin took only one step out of the stairwell before he was amazed.

*So this must be what Marc was talking about when he mentioned the boat's incredible interior,* Colin thought.

The initial comparison that came to Colin's mind was he just entered the upstairs hallway at John's mansion. As compared with the ceilings that were maybe seven feet high on the bottom level, the space between floor and ceiling here was at least twenty feet. The exotic carpeting, chandeliers hanging from the ceiling, artwork on the walls and sophisticated lighting made Colin imagine this was what a fancy hotel must resemble. But that was something he could only guess since he never stayed anywhere expensive before.

*They can't know that,* he thought, again reminding himself that he was supposed to be John Fare, a wealthy teenager accustomed to being among beautiful surroundings. Colin quickly wiped the impressed look from his face. To prove that he was not especially fascinated by the luxury, he yawned.

Although Colin passed a few other passengers in the hallway, he was still more interested in the setting than the people, most of whom were significantly older than those on the lower level. If Mr. Fare paid millions of dollars for this spot aboard, then Colin wondered whether the lower level passengers paid anything at all for their passage on the seacraft. Colin had many questions like this running through his mind but did not ask Huffington any of them.

When Colin approached an attractive middle-aged woman, he instantly recognized her, though he could not think from where. He must have stared at her for a moment too long because she eventually noticed his stare. The woman forced an awkward smile, which immediately made Colin look away, his face warming from embarrassment. Colin wanted desperately to look at her again but reminded himself there would be plenty of time for that later.

*I've seen her before*, Colin thought, *but when she was much younger. Was she in one of those movies from the '90s that John forced me to watch? Maybe that boring one about the sunset?*

If Mr. Fare paid a steep price for the chance to live on this seacraft, then surely the other passengers paid a lot, too. Colin doubted that most normal people—teachers, waitresses, auto mechanics—could afford a hefty pricetag.

*But a movie actress might be able to pay*, he thought.

Before Colin had the chance to look at the other passengers, Nigel Huffington stopped at one of the doors and opened it.

"After you," Huffington said.

"Are you sure we're in the right place?" Colin asked, his jaw slightly dropped. This room was nearly the size of his father's entire house. Having even spent the past month in a guestroom at the Fare mansion, Colin was not prepared for such a lavish space.

"I spoke with Tyler Ainsworth and this was the room he told me to give you," Huffington said. "Your father paid a lot of money, so you'll reap the benefits of his success."

Before he had the chance to question Huffington's comment, Colin noticed that this room did not appear to be totally vacated. The bed looked like it had recently been slept in and there were folded

clothes on top of a suitcase near one of the antique wooden armoires.

“How many people will I share this room with?” Colin asked. Although there was enough room for a few dozen cots, Colin could see only one king-sized bed against the far wall. There were other large couches in the room as well, which could’ve doubled as sleeping spots for other passengers.

“Don’t worry, you won’t have to be *bothered* with any roommates,” Nigel said. “You get the entire room to yourself.”

“What about the clothes?” Colin asked, pointing to the armoire. “And the bed? It looks like someone has slept in it recently.”

“I’m sorry, the maid must not have gotten to your room yet,” Nigel said. “I can understand why you must be so upset with these *wretched* conditions.”

Just like his first days at the Zwier Academy, Colin already felt like he was not going to fit in well; this Nigel character already seemed to dislike him. For the first time in his life, Colin wanted to admit how poor he really was so Nigel might not hate him so much. Unfortunately, Colin could never do that.

“This room looks like someone lives in it and I didn’t want anyone to think I was here to rob them.”

Nigel gathered up the clothes without further explanation.

“Please remain in your room until Mr. Ainsworth arrives to give you an introduction,” Nigel said. “We will be starting the engines at any moment, and Mr. Ainsworth is requesting everyone stay in their rooms until we are under way. It could be awhile until he comes to your room, so please have patience.”

Before Colin could ask another question, Nigel walked out the door, slamming it shut behind him. Colin’s mind and nerves both raced at a hundred miles per hour. Now that he had a moment to think about John, Colin suddenly lost all of the excited energy coursing through his veins since the moment he stepped foot on the seacraft.

*This was what he wanted*, Colin reminded himself. *He really might’ve pulled that trigger if I hadn’t agreed to come here.*

Fighting the urge to dwell on the friend he left behind, Colin

considered exploring the large room to pass the time. But the one thing in the room that seemed to call to him was not the antique armoires or the closet doors or the couches or the small bookshelf. Colin's eyes could not keep from falling upon the large bed. He did not even care that another person recently slept in it. He tossed his bag onto a nearby chair and plopped down on the bed, determined to rest for just a few minutes until his body tapped his internal reservoir of energy.

Before the thought of how wonderful this bed felt reached Colin's brain, he passed out cold, his body finally succumbing from his long journey to this moment.

# CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Alexandra Vrettos did not think of herself as a conspirator, but she certainly didn't want to think of herself as a rat, either.

*Or more like a tattletale, that's what the children would say, she thought.*

Having been a second-grade teacher for the last three years, Alexandra realized that every single one of the kids she ever taught were not likely to survive the comet strike.

*At least they'll be with their families when the comet hits, which is a lot more than I can say about myself,* the young teacher thought, trying not to ponder the fate of her parent and siblings.

She felt increasingly guilty for somehow 'lucking out' by winning a spot aboard the space station for the big 'Inaugural Month,' an opportunity she had taken full advantage of so all the second-graders at her school would want her as their teacher. Now, her desire for admiration would lead to a lifetime of nightmares unless the experts on Earth somehow found a way to stop Comet Clement. Alex could barely sleep, her dreams filled with the terrified screams of seven-year old children all sentenced to death. *What kind of government would leave small children on Earth rather than bring them to the space station?*

"The same kind of government that lies to people in order to trap them," Patrick O'Brien had told her. "The same kind of government that knows a comet is on the way, builds a space station

under the guise of scientific advancement and then chooses a group of young, single people to survive a worldwide calamity so they can repopulate Earth with the human race. And all the while, they trick the survivors into believing that they've been brought aboard this station simply to celebrate its completion."

"You think they've known about the comet all along?" Alexandra had asked, fascinated by Patrick's talk of conspiracy.

Alex considered this idea herself—all of the circumstances surrounding the space station had seemed a little too coincidental—but she never spoken her thoughts aloud. Had she not grown so close to O'Brien during the weeks aboard the space station, Alex still wasn't sure she'd admit how she thought something fishy was going on.

She first met Patrick O'Brien on the shuttle ride to the station, as they were seated next to each other and struck up conversation. Alexandra and Patrick had been among the people randomly selected to live aboard the station during its first month. The two quickly realized that they had a lot in common—both in their mid-twenties, well educated and in peak physical condition—but most of the people 'randomly selected' shared these traits. Still, Alex felt an instant bond with Patrick and was thrilled when they arrived at the station and discovered that they shared the same pod. Alex's sense of romanticism was dashed upon Patrick's confession that he became engaged just days before the launch. It was something that he kept secret from the Space Station Agency, but a secret he didn't mind sharing once he was safely aboard the station.

"Wesley Maddox seems to think George Marshall and other people in the government knew about the comet since before the idea of a space station was even introduced to the American public," Patrick had told her.

He'd gone on to tell her everything about the likelihood of a government cover-up. Alexandra was certainly troubled by these theories, but not nearly as angry or bitter about the situation as Patrick. The friendly guy she'd befriended had transformed into a much more dangerous, rebellious man who spoke of dangerous plans to force George Marshall into allowing him passage back to Earth.

Alex made clear her reluctance to take part in any sort of physical action he planned. Alex thought Patrick deserved the right to leave and wanted to show support in some way. She promised that any plans Patrick shared with her would remain between the two of them, that her allegiance was with him instead of President Marshall.

Patrick accepted this about Alex and the two still talked, though not as often as they had when first arriving at the station. The Marine presence was much more evident now and Alex had little doubt they were aware of the threat Patrick presented. A small part of her mind felt relieved that O'Brien put some distance in their relationship.

*Maybe I can convince him not to attempt anything rash, to shut his mouth and keep him from saying anything stupid to get him in trouble, she thought when she worried he was digging a hole too deep to recover from. But there's nothing I can say. Patrick's heart is in love and won't let his mind listen to reason. There's nothing I can do now but steer clear of him and keep myself out of trouble. If he goes through with his plan and there's an investigation, enough people know about our friendship that I'll be the person the Marines or George Marshall come to first. I can't give any indication that I know anything about this.*

Alexandra hoped that avoiding Patrick was the easiest way to keep her nose clean. Unfortunately for Alex, it wasn't long until she floated right into the middle of a situation that forced her to decide whether she was on Patrick's side or if she was on George Marshall's side.

While making her usual rounds around the station, speaking to a few other people she'd become friendly with, Alexandra stumbled upon a conversation between two people she never expected to see speaking with one another. Although Alex only met Wesley Maddox once over the past month, she felt like she knew him on a personal basis because of the stories she heard Patrick tell about him. That was why she was shocked to see Maddox and George Marshall emerge from the command center corner together.

For some reason, warning bells resonated in her mind as she realized Wesley Maddox was fraternizing with the man supposed to be



his enemy. When Maddox glanced at her, there was no recognition in his eyes and he continued speaking with Marshall. Neither man paid much attention to her as they floated by and kept their voices loud enough for Alex to still overhear.

*Do I take the chance of spying and report back to Patrick?* Alex wondered. Her brain had less than a few seconds to make up its mind. Before she had enough time to weigh the pros and cons, Alex found herself floating in the same direction of the two men, getting close enough to hear what they were talking about.

“Make sure you don’t tell O’Brien that you told me his plan,” George Marshall said. “I don’t want to give him time to plan anything else.”

“Will you at least tell me how you plan on handling the situation?” Maddox asked.

“I’m sorry, Wesley. Considering you’ve been blaming everything squarely on me, I don’t know if it would be in my best interests to keep you abreast of everything I have planned,” Marshall said. “Because of you, I have to worry about O’Brien kidnapping my wife to use as a hostage in the hijacking of one of the space shuttles. Even though you let me know about it, that still doesn’t put you in my best graces. I could still charge you with treason.”

“I didn’t tell you O’Brien’s plan to save my skin,” Maddox shot back. “I told you because I don’t want trouble aboard the station.”

“Trust me, I have something in store for O’Brien,” Marshall said. “I’m having something brought from Earth on the final shuttle before the comet strike that will assure no more problems. I know the kid is in love, but I’ll put an end to his suffering nice and quick. Plus, it will stop O’Brien’s allies from ever trying something like this again.”

George Marshall spoke with a coldness that Alexandra never would have expected.

Maddox stopped where he was and watched the former president continue floating down the hallway. Alexandra quickly ducked into the first open pod that she passed. After waiting in the pod for nearly a minute, she finally saw Maddox float by, heading in the opposite direction of the former president.

When Alexandra emerged, she saw Maddox's head hanging low. Alex could not believe what she had heard. Wesley Maddox—the American hero who'd built the space station, Patrick O'Brien's personal hero for speaking the truth—sold out O'Brien to save his own skin. Alexandra did not agree with O'Brien's misguided plans but she definitely didn't agree with Maddox and Marshall's plan to deal with Patrick. There was little doubt in Marshall's voice that Patrick would be severely punished if he followed through on his kidnapping plot. Alex could not begin to fathom what torturous instrument would be brought on the final shuttle to punish O'Brien.

# CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Within the span of one day, Lucas Stevens realized he never knew the true definition of boring until he moved into the secret Army warehouse facility in the middle of the Arizona desert. After spending the most exciting days of his directorial career placing cameras around the impact site in Russia, Steven's adventure came to a screeching halt when he was rushed back to America. He'd hoped to go back to Hollywood and continue post-production work on "Building a Dream" but that was not meant to be.

Despite finishing all the work needed for the comet documentary (there was nothing else to be done until the film's star—or in this case, the comet—arrived on Earth), he was told that he'd have to go into seclusion with the rest of the final passengers going to the space station.

And those were *not* exciting. Stevens expected to recognize some of the people who'd be the planet's final survivors, but it didn't take long to realize he was the most famous person of the dozen already there. There was a teenage girl on crutches who kept to herself, Peter Mansfield's wife and kids, and a few other people who Stevens wouldn't have known from the thousands of extras who'd ever worked on his movies. As disappointing as it was to recognize not a single person, Stevens was more upset when nobody knew who *he* was. Being one of the most famous men in Hollywood, he never expected a day when people didn't call out his name when they saw

him. Stevens often found fame annoying but now that it was gone, he felt like a piece of himself was missing. For this reason, the director spent most of his time alone, thinking and planning how to make his comet documentary more interesting.

As Stevens continued to jot down ideas, he heard a distant rumbling that everyone noticed. The quiet group of people suddenly showed some spark, as the children led the charge to the entrance doors. The only person who stayed behind was Mrs. Mansfield.

“What’s all the excitement about?” Stevens asked shyly when the two were alone.

“An approaching helicopter,” Mrs. Mansfield explained. “It shows up every couple of days with a new person or two. Everyone was asleep when you showed up, so that’s why there wasn’t much of a welcoming committee. Unless you haven’t been able to tell, there isn’t much excitement around here, nothing to do but sit around and wait. So when a helicopter arrives, it’s the only significant thing that happens.”

“Who’s showing up today?” the director asked.

Mrs. Mansfield shrugged.

“You know as much as I do,” she said. “My husband doesn’t tell me as much as I’d like to know. All he tells me is that everyone here—and everyone who will come here—serves an important purpose.”

Lucas Stevens excused himself and followed the rest of the group, who crossed the dusty, decrepit building.

“I wouldn’t go outside, it’s too hot,” one of the Mansfield children said.

Before anyone could object, the double doors to the building swung open and Peter Mansfield walked in followed by two people, a well-dressed man and a young woman. Mansfield’s children jumped all over their father’s leg, while the others greeted the man and the woman. Although the young woman was attractive, she did not look familiar to any of them unlike the well-dressed man, who was instantly recognizable to all.

“You’re ‘America’s Smartest Person’,” the girl with the crutches said.

Indeed, even Lucas Stevens knew of Christopher Fratanoro, the college professor who'd taken America by storm a year ago when he'd dominated *Twenty-Five Questions*. Stevens was not a big fan of television but it was impossible for any American not to have known Fratanoro.

"Call me Chris," he modestly told the group.

The group led 'America's Smartest Person' and the young woman through the building and showed them to the giant room with the cots. The young woman went off on her own to an empty corner of the room, while the others continued to surround Fratanoro and pelt him with questions, mostly wanting him to answer trivia questions. Stevens watched as the professor remained friendly with his fans, but he recognized the look of impatience growing on Fratanoro's face. It was the same expression Stevens must've had many times when autograph seekers hounded him in public.

*I hated being bothered by fans all the time*, Stevens told himself, though a feeling of jealousy strengthened in his chest. *And yet everyone recognizes this game show contestant, whose fifteen minutes of fame have been over for a year! I won an Academy Award last year!*

Finally fed up with Fratanoro, Stevens stormed back to his corner, wishing he could stop hearing everyone throwing trivia questions toward 'America's Smartest Person.' The director sat back on his cot and picked up his small notebook, trying to concentrate on other angles he could take in telling the story of the comet. Stevens wished he had a camera with him so he could do some interviews and get some of these passengers on film. He never had time to think of asking Mansfield for a camera to use in the facility.

*Now's my chance*, Stevens thought. He desperately looked around, knowing that he saw Mansfield enter the building with the two new arrivals.

"Is your husband still here?" Stevens asked Mrs. Mansfield.

She glanced toward the hallway but found it empty.

"Peter left a few minutes ago," she said. "He doesn't stay more than the few minutes it takes to show the new arrivals inside. If you hurry, you might be able to catch Peter before his ride leaves."

Stevens ran when he heard the rumbling of the helicopter rotors. He slammed open the front doors and was hit with a blast of hot desert air and a face full of warm, swirling sand. As Stevens wiped the sand from his eyes, he watched as the chopper lifted into the sky and flew off.

Dejected, Stevens returned inside the building and moped back to the main room. He was at least glad to see the buzz around Fratanoro had ended. When Stevens went back to his empty corner of the large room, he found it was no longer quite so empty.

"Dr. Chris Fratanoro, it's nice to meet you," the college professor said as he extended his hand to Stevens.

"'America's Smartest Person,' I know who you are," Stevens said, hesitantly accepting Fratanoro's handshake.

"Please, call me Chris. I hate when people only associate me with that show," he said. "You have *no idea* how annoying it can be to always be recognized."

*Even 'America's Smartest Person' doesn't know me?* Stevens wondered. *He must not have answered too many questions about movies or entertainment.*

"I know a thing or two about that," Stevens said. "It's happened to me a couple of times in my life as well."

Fratantoro stopped shuffling through his bag of books and looked more closely at Stevens, who now felt uncomfortable knowing he was being studied. But the college professor's gaze never turned to one of recognition.

"I'm sorry, I never caught your name," Fratanoro said.

"Lucas Stevens," the director said, expecting that his name to ring a bell. It didn't.

"How do people recognize you, Mr. Stevens?" Fratanoro asked. "Are you in a well-known profession?"

"I'm a director," Stevens said.

"Of movies?" 'America's Smartest Person' asked.

"That's right. I don't mean to brag but my last two films each grossed over \$250 million at the box office. And those are only the domestic numbers."

“And those numbers are good?” Fratanoro asked.

At first, Stevens couldn’t tell whether the man was just joking with him or somehow insulting him. In Stevens’s experiences, intelligent people had a way of looking down their noses at anything they might consider uneducated, like the entertainment industry. But the director realized Fratanoro’s question contained no hidden meaning.

“I could approach any studio executive, tell them any crazy idea and they would greenlight a nine-figure budget without batting any eyelash,” Stevens said. As he spoke, he realized *he* was the one coming off as cocky, especially when he saw the professor now blushing at his own ignorance.

“I guess that *is* pretty good then,” Fratanoro said genially. “Unfortunately, I haven’t had time to get to the movies the past few years. When I’m not teaching or trying to escape *Twenty-Five Questions* fans, I’m usually reading.”

The professor sat down on his cot and took out one of his thick history books, which he flipped open and began to peruse. Stevens was too uncomfortable in this man’s presence to remain in this section of the room, so he picked up his own bag and excused himself.

“I have a tendency to snore, I don’t want to interrupt your reading,” he lied, walking away despite Fratanoro’s assertions that noise wasn’t a bother to him.

Fortunately, the limited number of people at the warehouse meant there were still areas of cots where Stevens could distance himself from the others. He tossed his bag onto a new cot and watched as the pillow fell to the floor. He picked it up from the ground and was about to put it back in place when he noticed an envelope placed under the pillow.

*What is this?* the director wondered.

The envelope was tinged a shade of off-white, as if quite a few years old. When he flipped it over, he saw two words printed on the front: EMILY PETERSON. Although not completely sure, Stevens thought this was the name of the teenage girl on the crutches who lived across the room. He glanced over at the girl, who was in her

usual position, lying on her bed, arms behind her head, staring straight up at the ceiling. Whatever this letter was, she apparently had no idea Stevens had it in his possession.

The director stared at the letter for a long time, trying to figure out what to do with it. The obvious thing was to approach the girl and hand it over. But that would do nothing to help break the monotony, especially since the envelope was not even sealed, the flap simply tucked in.

*This is wrong*, Stevens told himself, as he opened the flap and took out the long handwritten letter. The first thing the director saw on the top of page one was the date: JULY 2011. He began to read, at first stopping every few sentences to look up and make sure Emily was still lying on her bed. But as Stevens read more and more, he found himself totally immersed. By the time he was finished reading, he could not begin to understand how this letter had gotten here. All he could think was that the teenage girl misplaced it, but she certainly didn't seem to notice it was no longer in her possession.

*No need to rush giving it back*, Stevens thought. *I'll just wait until I have my camera, ask her more about the letter's contents.*

Lucas Stevens finally had a new angle about how to approach directing his documentary. And Emily Peterson would become the first human star.



# CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Colin McKay lay on a bed but total blackness was all around. Somehow, a buoyant sensation in the pit of his stomach let him know the bed lazily floated hundreds of feet off from the ground. A quick glance over the edge of the bed showed total darkness below, but he somehow knew that falling off would spell doom. Even though Colin did not know how he got here—did not know *where here* exactly was—there was still no worry in his relaxed mind about the destination of this trip. This relaxation made Colin question whether this was real or not; a small part of his mind knew reality ended and his dream world began. Still, Colin did not dwell on this, as he was too interested to discover what all of this meant.

The bed - still for the journey - suddenly came to life, as if its engine had been turned on. The buoyant feeling in his stomach was replaced with a slight vibration and Colin's center of balance changed just enough to realize he was now moving, even if very slowly. The vibration soon became unnoticeable and produced a soothing feeling, making Colin even more relaxed than before.

Just as the dream became boring, he heard a voice that *sounded* far away but he knew was very close. He could not hear the exact words being spoken, but recognized the voice. It belonged to a person he never expected to hear from again. Colin climbed to the edge of the bed but this time, he clearly saw John Fare grasping a sheet that hung off the bed. John looked up toward Colin.

“I’m sorry,” Colin said to his best friend, his voice calm despite his mind feeling totally frantic. “Did you want to come on the bed, too?”

Like always, John was the exact opposite of Colin; his expression was calm even though his voice sounded like it was in distress.

“There’s not enough room for both of us up there,” he said, his hands sliding dangerously down the sheet. Colin saw that John had less than a foot before he would fall into the abyss of darkness below.

“Then *you* come up here and *I’ll* jump off,” Colin said without hesitation, knowing in his heart that he’d gladly sacrifice himself to save his best friend. But John shook his head.

“It’s too late for that,” John said.

For the first time since Colin looked over the edge, his best friend’s expression changed to contempt. John made no attempt to hide the hatred in his eyes, and Colin knew that anger was aimed directly toward him. His best friend let go of the sheet and vanished into the black nothingness below. Panicked, Colin leaned as much of his body off of the bed as he could without falling off.

Even more distressing was the arrival of a strange new sound, a loud, hollow banging noise that he couldn’t identify, a sound that seemed to grow louder and louder until...

Colin’s eyes snapped open and he realized he’d been dreaming. When Colin heard the banging again, he jumped so suddenly that he nearly fell out of the huge bed.

He jumped up and crossed the room, wiping his eyes in an attempt to get rid of the fatigue. The man standing in front of him was tall and well dressed, but there was something about him that Colin immediately mistrusted. Still, the man extended his hand.

“Mr. Fare, my name is Tyler Ainsworth,” he said, as the two shook hands. Colin noticed that Ainsworth had a rather weak grip, which Colin’s father always said was a sign of weakness in a man’s character. “I met with your father a few months back. He was a good man. He mentioned that he would be giving you this spot on board, obviously a sign of a father’s love for his son.”

Colin immediately thought of his dream, of the vivid image of John letting go of the bed sheet and disappearing into blackness. Hearing Ainsworth talk about Mr. Fare's love for John broke Colin's heart; the sharp knife of guilt again plunged into his chest.

"Call me John," Colin finally said, blurting out the first thing that came to mind after a lengthy pause between them.

"I was wondering, what took you so long to get here? I called your father weeks ago but you still nearly missed the boat, so to speak."

Colin frantically searched for a feasible answer to the question he never really considered.

"I had some communication problems with my father," Colin lied, hoping Ainsworth wouldn't want him to get into specifics. "I was on a trip for my boarding school and out of contact with him for a few weeks. The first time I spoke to him after he heard from you, he got me on the first plane back to California."

"I see," Ainsworth said. "What boarding school did you go to?"

"The Zwier Academy," Colin answered.

"Since everyone has already familiarized themselves with their surroundings, I thought you might like a quick tour," Ainsworth said. "The captain of the seacraft has just assured me the engines are running smoothly. Everyone has been informed that they can leave their rooms now so I can make a few introductions."

"Right now?" Colin asked, trying to think of a polite way to get out of such a tour. He figured that the fewer people he met, the less likely it would be that someone would discover his true identity.

"I don't see why not," Ainsworth said.

Ainsworth did not strike Colin as the kind of person to take no for an answer. If he was going to get caught, he was going to get caught, and if that happened before the comet struck, at least he could return to the Fare mansion and not die with the guilt of abandoning his best friend.

"I would love a tour," Colin said, stepping into the hall. Having been so paranoid about locking doors ever since the comet led to unprecedented crime sprees, Colin looked down at the doorknob and

noticed that there was no lock.

“Don’t worry, once you meet everyone who lives on the upper level, you’ll have nothing to fear about thieves,” Ainsworth said.

Colin nodded though he couldn’t help wonder the repercussions he’d face if anyone discovered the gun that he sneaked on board. Ainsworth apparently had ill will toward the lower level passengers. He was tempted to ask why, but wondered if that was a question he should already know the answer to. That would be one more thing he’d have to figure out eventually.

The hallways were mostly empty, as Ainsworth and Colin saw only a few others in their corridor.

“More people are usually out,” Ainsworth explained. “Like I said, I expect more guests to come out of their rooms.”

The first couple they encountered was an older gentleman and the attractive middle-aged woman Colin passed earlier. Tyler briefly introduced Colin to the couple—the man a friendly movie producer named Gaspare Carollo, his wife a former actress named Betsy—before continuing down the hallway. The end of the corridor opened into a huge room with dozens of chairs and couches, a full bar, two different pianos and half a dozen entrances to other corridors.

“This is where everyone usually filters,” Tyler explained. “As you can tell by all of the hallways, the lobby connects everyone from the top floor.”

Tyler explained that the lobby was also where food was served twice a day by the seacraft’s five-star chef. At the mention of food, Colin felt his stomach rumbling, but curiosity about the rest of the seacraft helped him ignore it. At the far end of the room, Colin noticed a set of doors that looked like an elevator.

“That’s exactly what it is,” Tyler explained when Colin pointed them out. “It leads to the control room of the seacraft, where Admiral Matthews and his men spend the majority of their time. You’ll periodically see the admiral and his three thugs...I mean crewmembers...walking through the upper level.”

“I briefly met one of those *thugs* already,” Colin said. “He actually wanted to search my bag when I came aboard.”

Tyler appeared shocked, which transformed to anger.

"I told Admiral Matthews that his men were *not* to harass any of my passengers," he said. "I'm sorry if he bothered you."

"It's okay," Colin said. "Nigel got him to back off."

Tyler continued to explain that the elevator and control room were restricted to all guests, but there was nothing up there of interest anyway. As they walked around the lobby, more guests showed up. Tyler made as many introductions as possible. Colin normally felt uneasy about meeting new people but was surprised to find most of Ainsworth's upper level guests very polite.

*They must actually be buying that I'm John and I'm rich*, Colin thought, relieved that nobody noticed the shabbiness of his clothes.

"Mr. Fare nearly missed the boat," Tyler said, making the same joke to every person they spoke with. "He had quite a harrowing ordeal getting here."

Colin hadn't explained half his trip to Ainsworth, but the golf-ball sized lump on the back of his head and constant pain was a reminder of what he'd gone through. But as he met more friendly people, he began to wonder if being one of the 'rich and famous' wouldn't be so bad after all.

Tyler introduced Colin to a dozen more people in the lobby, including a country music star, a sports franchise owner and a wealthy Senator from one of the New England states. Even though everyone seemed much older than him, they were all friendly enough to be around.

"If you'll come this way, I'll show you a few other entertainment rooms to keep yourself occupied," Tyler said.

They walked down one of the other corridors and stopped at a room labeled "Library." Tyler opened the door and flipped on a light switch to reveal full bookshelves along every wall, not to mention a dozen types of reading chairs and tables. Although Colin thought that the *real* John Fare would love this room, Colin wasn't much of a reader. And based upon the emptiness of the room, the light coating of dust on the furniture and the perfectly neat book arrangements on the bookshelves, Colin guessed not many other passengers took much

interest in this room, either.

"I know what you're thinking," Tyler said, as if reading Colin's mind. "But we'll be spending *a lot of time* on this boat over the next few years. By the end of our journey, just about everyone will have spent many hours in here."

Tyler turned off the light and led Colin down the next corridor, again stopping at another door labeled "Theater."

"I highly doubt you'll find this room as vacant as the last," he said.

When Ainsworth opened the door, the main light was also off, but that didn't mean the room was empty. An animated movie played on the big projection screen at the front of the room. The light from the movie screen was just bright enough for Colin to see a few rows of large, plush chairs and two large cases of movies. Sitting in one of the front-row chairs was a young boy, the only person in the entire room. The kid glanced at Colin and Tyler, but focused his attention back on the movie.

"That's BJ Jones, do you know him?" Tyler asked Colin.

Colin looked closer at the little kid. Skinny and bespectacled, the boy reminded Colin of John at that age, but he couldn't say he knew who the kid was.

"I don't think so," Colin finally answered. "Should I?"

"He's the son of your father's boss, Bernard Jones," Ainsworth said. "I thought maybe your families might've gotten together at some point."

Colin never recalled hearing John complain about going to work functions with his father. Considering that Mr. Fare was so rarely around, Colin figured John would've mentioned something like that.

"I don't remember meeting the Jones family before," Colin said honestly.

"You'll usually find little BJ in here regardless of the movie that's playing. A sign-up sheet lets guests reserve which movies they'd like to watch. Unfortunately, we've had a few disagreements in movie selections during our time aboard, but the sheet appears to have

ended that. You can find the sheet attached to the wall next to the movie case.”

When they left the room, Tyler explained that there was only one final room on the tour, a room the seacraft owner suggested Colin put to.

“I’ve told most of my guests the same thing, but most have ignored me so far,” Tyler said. “The world as we know it will not be the same world we return to one day. There’s no telling how much damage this comet will do, but the most devastating effects will take place in the months and years after the comet has struck. We will be forced to live as the explorers did thousands of years ago, trying to inhabit a foreign land with few resources. Because of this, nobody can afford to be soft, nobody can afford to be weak, nobody can afford to be in anything but tiptop physical condition. You look to be in good shape. Did you play many sports?”

This could’ve been a topic Mr. Fare discussed with his boss, Mr. Jones. Although it was unlikely the computer mogul would remember such mundane details, Colin decided he’d better pretend to answer how the real John Fare would’ve.

“I was never good at sports,” he said, even though his muscular stature made him look like an athlete. “But I *did* used to work out quite a bit.”

“This room should be perfect for you,” Tyler said as they stopped at the final door with a label, this one reading “Gymnasium.”

When Tyler opened the door and Colin walked inside, he was immediately reminded of the weight room at the Zwier Academy. All of the equipment in this room was brand new and state-of-the-art, nothing like the ancient machines and rusty weights from his public school. Colin knew he would be spending a lot of time in this room.

*Maybe I’ll even start running on the treadmills, like that girl over there,* he thought, spotting a beautiful blonde running on a treadmill in the corner. Colin was never one to run inside on a treadmill, preferring to do his jogging outside, even if rain started to—

His thought-process came to a screeching halt when he looked closer at the only person in the entire room, the jogger. She wore less

make-up and more clothes than she wore on *Beach Patrol*, but Heather Sanders was *definitely* just across the room from Colin. The famous actress—who'd moved on from television to movies—was running at a pace that Colin would be proud to equal and did not care that perspiration poured down her face. Still, she looked as beautiful and lithe as Colin ever saw.

"I take from your gawking that you recognize her," Tyler Ainsworth said, also openly staring at the actress. She was so focused on running that she did not glance in their direction.

"Heather Sanders," Colin said. "And I *wasn't* gawking."

In truth, Colin had stared at the actress because he couldn't believe that he was actually seeing her. He thought of John, who'd been in love with Heather Sanders since he was old enough to understand the birds and the bees.

*If John had known she would be here, there's no way in hell he would've given up this ticket*, Colin thought, a rare smile at the thought of his friend.

"*Sure* you weren't gawking," Ainsworth said. "Just like the other guys on board haven't been gawking either. Would you like to meet her?"

Colin suddenly felt panic jolt his nerves at the thought of speaking with Heather Sanders. There was only an age difference of only five or six years between the two—fewer than anyone else Colin met so far—but Heather was unlike anyone Colin met. His tongue tied knots in his mouth before he even spoke.

"Maybe some other time," Colin said. "She looks very focused on what she's doing."

Just as he said that, the alarm on the treadmill beeped and the two men watched Heather slow down and come to a stop. She grabbed the towel hanging from the side of the treadmill and wiped the sweat from her face.

"Looks like you lucked out," Tyler said. "Come on, I'll introduce you."

"That's okay, I don't want to interrupt her," Colin said.

Heather Sanders approached the two of them, Colin's heart



beating faster in his chest.

“Oh...hi, Mr. Ainsworth,” Heather said when she noticed Tyler. Colin sensed that there might be a bit of uneasiness in her voice.

“Hello, Heather. I’m amazed you somehow remain as beautiful when you’re working out,” Tyler said.

“Uhh...thanks, I guess,” Heather said, quickly turning toward Colin to avoid further eye contact with Tyler. Fortunately, the expression on Heather’s face softened when she looked at Colin. “I imagine you must be our new guest, the person responsible for delaying the seacraft launch?”

There was not a single iota of malice when Heather spoke, but Colin felt embarrassed anyway.

“Yeah, I guess that’s me,” Colin said, his voice weak, nearly cracking. He coughed and swallowed hard before adding, “Sorry about the wait.”

“I’m in no rush to get anywhere. I was wondering who could be important enough for Mr. Ainsworth to put off the big launch, even for a few minutes.”

“How many times do I have to tell you to call me Tyler? Calling me Mr. Ainsworth makes me feel old,” he said.

“I’m Heather Sanders,” she said. “We’d stand here all day if we waited for Tyler to make the proper introductions.”

Tyler laughed much harder than the joke deserved.

“I know who you are,” he said, his voice nearly failing him again.

“This is John Fare, his father is CEO of the computer company owned by Bernard Jones,” Tyler explained. “He’ll be staying in hallway one, just a few doors down from me.”

“Hallway one? Wow, your father *must be* important if you got one of the best rooms,” she said.

“Heather, all of the rooms are of equal luxury,” Tyler lied.

“That’s what he tries to convince everyone,” Heather said. “But we’ve heard stories from other residents of that hallway. Why didn’t your father come on the tour with the two of you?”

As Colin gazed into her beautiful blue eyes, he was at a loss for

words. Heather Sanders was the first person he felt guilty lying to. Luckily, Tyler jumped in for Colin.

“Unfortunately, there was not enough room for Mr. Fare to be with us,” Tyler said. “He gave up his opportunity to survive for his son to come live with us.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” she said. “If you ever need to talk to anyone, my door is always open.”

The remorse in Heather’s eyes looked genuine, as she briefly touched Colin’s arm. The spot she touched burst with a tingling intense pleasure as his face burned hot again.

“My father wanted me to have the chance to live,” he said somberly. “That’s why I’ll take Mr. Ainsworth’s advice and exercise vigorously for when it comes time to rebuild Earth.”

With that, both men watched Heather Sanders walk out of the room. When she was out of hearing range, Colin did not hide the excitement from meeting the famous actress.

“I can’t believe Heather Sanders is here,” he said.

“And now she even knows your name,” Tyler said. “I’m afraid that she isn’t nearly as friendly as she might pretend to be. In fact, I’m the only person on board she chooses to associate with on a *regular* basis. She and I have a very... close... relationship.”

Colin understood what Tyler was trying to insinuate—that Heather was off limits to anyone else but him—but Colin wasn’t quite sure that he believed anything Ainsworth told him. Upon seeing the interaction between the two of them, Colin doubted Heather Sanders liked Tyler Ainsworth in the slightest. But with Colin’s true identity in danger of being discovered, he decided not to ask any questions about the actress that could offend Ainsworth.

“All that’s left is to meet a few more of the guests we haven’t run across just yet,” Tyler said. “Didn’t you mention something about being into sports?”

“I love baseball,” Colin blurted out.

As unlikely as it might be, Colin’s mind immediately thought of one particular player—his favorite baseball player since he’d been eight years old. For some reason, the thought stayed in his head all

the way through the time when Ainsworth stopped in front of a door and knocked. When the door opened and Jeremy Walker appeared, Colin was not surprised.

Unfortunately, it took only a few seconds for Colin to begin questioning his choice of role model. Without even glancing in Colin's direction, Jeremy Walker spoke curtly to Ainsworth.

"I really hope you're here to tell me you found me a new room," the baseball star said.

"I told you Mr. Walker, all of the rooms have already been assigned," Tyler said. "And I assure you, all of the rooms are of equal brilliance and—"

"And luxury, yeah, we've heard your claims," Walker interrupted. "But according to Bernard Jones' wife, the rooms in her corridor are all much nicer."

"That is a matter of opinion," Tyler said.

Walker looked back into his room before stepping out into the hallway. He leaned forward and lowered his voice.

"Look, the only opinion that matters to me is my wife's," Walker said. "Mrs. Jones let her see their room, and now my wife has been *nagging and nagging* to get one of those rooms. Please, for the sake of my wife's happiness and *my sanity*, see what you can do."

Tyler nodded his head in understanding.

"If the moment arises when a room becomes available, I'll keep you in mind," Tyler said. "But my reason for the visit is to introduce you to the final guest who just arrived."

At this point, Walker finally looked at Colin. He didn't know what to say, nor did he know how to feel when Jeremy Walker looked him over without speaking a single word.

"You're introducing me to one of the *lower-level* passengers?" Walker finally asked.

"Mr. Fare is not from the lower level. It took him a little longer to come aboard," Tyler explained. "His father was a very influential man who gave up his chance to live so his son could."

Walker looked over Colin, as the young man was the only upper level guest who could rival him in size.

“Yeah, nice to meet you, kid,” Walker said.

“John was telling me how much of a baseball fan he was,” Tyler said. “He undoubtedly must know of your accomplishments on the field.”

“I sure do,” Colin said. “You were always my favorite player, Mr. Walker. I always wished I could play like you.”

“Which corridor are you staying in, John?” Walker asked.

Colin turned to Ainsworth for assistance with this question.

“His room is in the same hall as mine,” Tyler answered.

“Actually, just a few doors down.”

Any friendliness Walker felt toward Colin immediately disappeared. Colin could feel his cheeks burning yet again as he saw the anger appear on his hero’s face.

“If you really like me so much, kid, why don’t you trade rooms with me?” Walker asked. “You know, since I’m your *favorite player*, and all.”

“I don’t know, I just got here,” Colin said, trying to deny Walker’s request without sounding too harsh.

“Let him get familiar with the seacraft before you start bugging him,” Ainsworth said.

Walker lowered his voice again, this time leaning much closer to Colin.

“Look, kid, I got Heather Sanders living next door, which is no good for me,” Walker said. “I’ve been trying to hook up with her the whole time I’ve been here but once I finally seal the deal, I’m not too sure it’ll be smart having my wife and mistress living next door to each other. So if you could just—”

“That’s enough,” Ainsworth interrupted. “I don’t want to deal with any marital problems on board my seacraft. Now if you’ll excuse us, I have one more *important* person must introduce Mr. Fare to.”

Ainsworth turned away suddenly and grabbed Colin by the arm, dragging him away before Walker could say anything else. Once they got a few feet away and heard Walker’s door close, Ainsworth continued to work himself into a frenzy.

“You must excuse Mr. Walker. I understand he was a very

successful athlete, but I'm beginning to learn he isn't the best person," Tyler said.

Indeed, Colin was quite disappointed at his hero's lack of character. Walker always seemed so friendly and family-oriented when shown on television, but a short conversation proved that Colin's worship should've been aimed elsewhere. Colin figured it was time to start looking up to people with true character.

"It's easy to misjudge people before you know them," Colin said.

"And did you hear him speak of Miss Sanders?" Ainsworth asked. "He thinks he's close to 'sealing the deal' with her? Believe me, Heather Sanders has much better taste, taste I highly doubt includes a brawny, brainless athlete like Jeremy Walker."

As one of a select few single women on board, Heather Sanders was apparently in high demand. Ainsworth and Walker were obviously staking their claim to her already and Colin could only imagine how many others must feel the same way as these two.

"Is this our hallway?" he asked.

"Yes," Ainsworth said. "Bernard Jones is one of our closest neighbors aboard."

"We're going to see Mr. Jones?" Colin asked nervously.

If there was one person on board with the possibility of figuring out Colin's deception, it was Bernard Jones. There was no telling how close Jones was to John's father, no telling if he'd seen pictures of John. Colin could only hope the important man was far too busy to notice mundane details like photographs of his CEO's family.

"I'm sure Bernard would like to greet you," Ainsworth said. "He's been awaiting your father's arrival for weeks. I'm sure he'll be glad to know you arrived."

Before Colin had time to come up with an excuse to avoid this meeting, the two already passed Colin's room and stopped at the next door. Ainsworth knocked and received an answer seconds later when an attractive woman opened the door.

"Hello, Tyler. Glad to see that the launch *actually* happened," she said impudently. "Even if it *was* past the scheduled time."

“May I have a word with Mr. Jones, ma’am?” Ainsworth asked politely.

Mrs. Jones eyeballed Colin for a moment before disappearing into the room.

“*This* is him?” Bernard Jones asked when he came outside.

“It is,” Ainsworth answered. “The two of you haven’t been properly introduced before. Mr. Bernard Jones, I would like to introduce John Fare.”

“You sure are a big kid. You don’t look a thing like your father,” Jones finally said as he extended his hand to Colin.

“I’ve heard that from a lot of people,” Colin said. If there was one thing that he had going for him, it was that the real John Fare didn’t look like his father, either.

“Well either way, your father was a good man, a brave man who obviously cared about you quite a lot,” Jones said. “I only wish there was a way he could’ve come aboard, too.”

“I agree,” Colin said quietly.

“Well, I’m sure I’ll be seeing quite a bit of you on board,” Bernard Jones said. “We’ll talk more later. Unfortunately, my wife is having a bit of a crisis finding room to unpack her belongings. I should be getting back to her.”

And with that, the introduction to the one person Colin feared most was over and his lie remained a secret. He’d still have to be careful about what he said around the guests but now that everybody believed he was John Fare, Colin had little reason to worry.

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Bernard Jones could not help thinking that the young man he just met seemed suspicious. He could not recall meeting Sam Fare’s son before, but Bernard had a hard time believing the kid he just met was related to his CEO. After all, Sam was a smaller guy and that kid was the exact opposite.

*Who else could it be?* Bernard thought. *How else would this kid have gotten aboard if he wasn’t really John Fare? Unless something awful*

*happened to the real John Fare...*

“Did you even hear a word I just said?” his wife asked.

“Yes, dear, more space,” Jones guessed, hoping his wife continued her usual complaint.

“You weren’t listening, like usual,” she whined. “Now go get me the suitcase that’s next to the armoire.”

Bernard sighed, but he did as his wife said, if only to avoid hearing more complaining. He constantly reminded himself that he was no longer in the real world and that making his wife happy was the only way to make his own life happy. Bernard dragged the suitcase over to his wife and continued to ponder his next move involving John Fare.

A crashing sound interrupted his train of thought as two photo albums fell from the opened suitcase.

“You actually brought picture albums?” Bernard asked. “I only told you we were going on vacation, not planning for the end of the world. What made you bring those?”

“Yes, you *lied* to me about where we were going,” his wife shot back. “And yet you have the audacity to question why *I* would pack something? Have you ever considered the thought of fires or robbers? I bring the important pictures of our life no matter where we go and it’s a good thing I brought them this time. I’m *really glad* you’ve taken notice to all of the hard work I put into packing our belongings.”

Knowing that this discussion could not go anywhere good for him, Bernard excused himself from the room, leaving his wife to finish going through their stuff. He had more important things to do anyway, like seeing what information he could find out from the kid claiming to be John Fare.

# CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

JUNE 10, 2020

TWO MONTHS, TWELVE DAYS UNTIL IMPACT...

For the hundredth time over the last few days, Marc Hudson unsnapped the back casing of his walkie-talkie, removed the four batteries and carefully replaced them, but not before to reading the diagrammed instructions to make sure the batteries were placed correctly. He powered the walkie-talkie back up, turned the dial to the correct frequency and pushed the transmit button. Marc proceeded to repeat the same phrase he'd said a thousand times since the seacraft disappeared under the Pacific Ocean.

"Hotel to seacraft, hotel to seacraft. Seacraft, please send your coordinates. Over," Marc said. Although he was beginning to wonder why he was wasting his breath, he repeated this same line a dozen more times before dropping the formality. "Tyler...Admiral Matthews...*anybody* aboard the seacraft, please copy."

For the next five minutes, Marc closed his eyes and focused his attention on the silence he heard in return, a silence he prayed would soon be broken. But the walkie-talkie remained noiseless.

Less than an hour after John Fare made his emergency boarding of the seacraft, Marc watched the large boat disappear under the waves and saw the shadow beneath the surface moving away. The next hour had been the longest sixty minutes of Marc's life. He paced the hotel's corridors countless times while Nigel's warnings of abandonment



played over and over in his head. But Marc's faith in his boss was restored when the walkie-talkie had crackled to life.

"Seacraft to hotel, do you read me, Marc?" Tyler had asked.

"Loud and clear, sir," Marc had responded, amazed by the clarity of sound from the handheld device.

Tyler went on to read him the seacraft's coordinates and explained that they were remaining on their planned course. He also explained that a representative from the government would be contacting Marc later that evening for a list of the day's coordinates. After signing off that first time, the next hour passed much quicker, as Tyler again contacted him at the appropriate time.

That process continued for the first five hours after the seacraft's departure. But as the sixth hour came and went without any contact—and subsequently the seventh and eight and every other hour—Marc grew increasingly concerned. He tried hailing the seacraft himself, but was unsuccessful.

*No, there has to be another explanation*, Marc had tried to convince himself, attempting to remain calm and not lose control. Regardless of what he told himself, Marc finally took Nigel's envelope from his back pocket and stared at it for hours, resisting the temptation to rip it open and read the letter inside.

Finally, Marc had put the unopened envelope away, knowing that opening the letter was his last resort and final admittance that he'd been abandoned. He held out hope that he'd open the letter aboard the seacraft one day and laugh with Tyler about Nigel's paranoid delusions.

But as the morning of the second day turned into afternoon, and afternoon turned into evening and night, Marc watched with hopelessness the ocean remained empty. Marc slept much better that second night—for nearly twelve hours—as he subconsciously passed through the stages of fear and denial and awoke accepting that neither the walkie-talkie would ever be used again.

On the morning of the third day, Marc felt much now that he came to grips with what his future would - or more specifically would *not* - have in store. Deep in his heart, he knew Tyler Ainsworth betrayed

him, knew Nigel Huffington's paranoia was reality, knew he would never again set foot on the seacraft. Although he still felt the sharp pain of betrayal, Marc knew he had two more months to move on and find an alternate plan.

*Not that there are any other viable options to survive...*

Still holding out a small bit of hope, he spent half the third day again sitting on Tyler's balcony, watching the ocean, praying that the seacraft would magically appear. He continued trying to call the seacraft, continued checking and rechecking the batteries in the walkie-talkie even though he knew it was a fruitless effort. Finally, Marc took the envelope out of his pocket, ripping it open before he had the chance to give it too much thought.

After reading the contents of the handwritten pages, the first thing that popped into Marc's mind was doubt. Nigel already hinted about his true identity, but the story he laid out seemed too implausible, too far-fetched to be true. The idea of a small, highly secretive group of the most powerful men in the government was exactly the type of Nigel's usual ravings. Nor did Marc think anybody else knew about Tyler's stay at a mental facility, something he'd heard a rumor about years ago before Tyler Jr. started working for his father. Marc hadn't even known Tyler back then, but heard whispers among some of the senior staff about problems that Tyler Sr.'s son had. It was not a topic Marc ever brought up with Tyler, but the fact that Nigel seemed to know about it made Marc consider that maybe Nigel wasn't as crazy as he acted.

The first half of the letter was interesting from the standpoint of its informative value, but the second half was just as unbelievable in a way that gave Marc hope he hadn't thought possible. A list of directions and a roughly drawn map supposedly led to a place only Nigel knew about. Again, Nigel's questionable mental state made Marc wonder about the authenticity of the information.

*Could Nigel be lying about all of this?*

Marc grabbed his few belongings and left the hotel, heading straight for the only car remaining in the parking lot: a classic he thought was some kind of Camaro or Mustang. Finding the doors unlocked was the

first bit of good luck that Marc came across. He found the second—and best—bit of luck in the form of keys hanging from the ignition. As if his luck was too good to be true, Marc slowly turned the key, half-expecting to find the car completely dead. But the powerful engine revved to life. The only thing he noticed was the gas tank nearly empty, but that was a problem whose solution rested in a small shed less than a few hundred yards away.

Leaving the engine running, Marc got out of the car and went to the shed that held the canisters of gasoline. He grabbed a few and a nearby funnel before heading back to the car. Marc topped off the gas tank and returned to the shed, grabbing the remaining canisters and loading them into the trunk. With the state of society a total mystery to Marc, he was unsure whether gas stations were still open, a risk he was not willing to take. The spare gas should be enough to fill up a few more times, though that would be nowhere near enough for the entire trip. He would just have to hope the few hundred dollars in his pocket would be enough.

*No time to worry about that now*, Marc thought, staying much calmer than he thought possible considering his dire circumstances.

Without glancing back at the hotel where he spent the last few months - and without looking toward the ocean that held the seacraft he'd spent so many years working to build - Marc pulled onto the wide open road with only one thought on his mind: survival.

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